



A Bet^{to} Wed
the Duke

LISA CAMPBELL

A Bet to Wed the Duke

She had a plan to win his hand but he won her heart instead...

Lisa Campell

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About the Author

Thank you

I want to personally thank you for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me. It's a blessing to have the opportunity to share with you, my passion for writing, through my stories.

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About the book



"I chose you. That is why I came here, to seduce you."

One rebellious impulse was all it required for the bankrupt Miss Frances Fortesque to make **a bet** with her tedious cousin; she would **marry the richest and most powerful** man in London or become her maid.

The **stakes are high**, and the odds are not in her favor.

But a lucky circumstance will bring Frances inside her target's home.
And the **seduction game is on**.

Ralph Wynter, Duke of Sinclair never wanted just one woman at his side and in his bed. However, now he has **one single desire**. The lady guest of his sister is **forbidden fruit**. Too young and too noble to indulge his **depraved fantasies**.

Ralph is determined to keep his distance from Frances, to protect both their honors. Yet, the minx **doesn't stop provoking him**. But as her power over him grows, a **shocking plot** against him is revealed, and the tables are turning.

With their secrets starting to spill, Ralph's enemies may tear them apart before Frances' wicked bet is won...

She had a plan to win his hand but he won her heart instead...



Chapter One

Royal Ascot, 1817

Frances bounced on her tiptoes, watching the impressive stallions' pound down the racetrack at impossible speeds. She held her breath as the jockeys flew past in a blur of brightly coloured shirts, her heart raced. The public crowd on the other side of the track erupted with a roar. She held onto her bonnet, the wind across the Ascot racecourse whipped her dress around her legs, all the fine men and ladies beside her murmured excitedly.

"Did he win?" Frances asked her cousin, Amelia, who stood haughtily beside her.

"Does it matter?" Amelia said, tossing her golden curls with a bored expression on her face.

Frances sighed inwardly. She wished her father had not arranged for Amelia to join them. It was Frances' first time at Royal Ascot, the social event of the season, and her snobbish cousin was already ruining it. Although Amelia and Frances were both eighteen years old, they looked at life very differently. Since she had come out into society two years ago, Frances had enjoyed every minute of the luxury, the balls and the garden parties. Amelia had recently become engaged to the boring Marquess Huntley and had become even more insufferable than she was before. She now viewed everything and everyone, especially Frances, as distinctly below her.

"Father?" Frances turned to Baron Andrew Fortescue, who was sipping champagne. "Do you know if the Marquess' horse won? Amelia is interested."

Amelia frowned at her and Frances smiled sweetly back.

“No, I believe it was the Prince Regent’s favourite, Lutzen, that crossed the line first,” her father said, smiling at the girls. “I’m sure your future husband won’t begrudge the Prince Regent his win.”

“Of course not.” Amelia rolled her blue eyes, unable to recognise the soft humour of her uncle.

“Come, Frances, let us go and look at the horses.”

Frances gratefully followed her father out to where the fabulous horses and their riders were gathered in the winners’ circle, catching a glimpse of the figure of the Prince Regent, aloof and stern, in the royal box.

“Have you enjoyed today, my dear?” her father asked, leading her to the Marquess Huntley’s horse, Adamant, that they had bet on together.

“Oh, yes!” Frances gushed, reaching out to pet the horse’s strong neck with her new white satin gloves. “It’s been so exciting! All the gentlemen dressed so finely and the ladies in their new gowns, like the new butter yellow muslin that Amelia wore...”

Frances let her sentence trail off. She and her father had had a minor disagreement a few weeks ago. Frances had hoped he might purchase her a new dress for the Royal Ascot, but in an expression of unusual frugality, he had said no. She now thought he might be saving a surprise of a new gown for the upcoming summer ball, and she now wanted to drop hints as to the kind of fabric she would most like. Her father sighed.

“I’m glad you’ve had a lovely day, dearest, but I’m afraid it’s time for me to share some difficult news with you.”

“Oh?”

Frances’ heart dropped. The last time her father had spoken to her like this had been the crushing day her mother had died. Though it was over ten years ago she still felt the edges of that crushing panic closing in on her. She took a deep breath.

“What is it, Father?”

“I need to be honest about our financial situation.” He rested his hand absent-mindedly on the horse’s neck. “Do you remember the investment I made last summer?”

Baron Fortescue had always kept his daughter abreast of their family finances. Aside from the Fortescue inheritance, he was also a successful painter in his own, and had appreciated the extra help of an intelligent daughter when negotiating payments and commissions. He had taught her basic economic principles and she had flourished. Now she tried to remember the exact details of their investment.

“It was in that new type of plumbing, was it not?”

He nodded. “There is no easy way to say it, but it turns out to have been a manipulation. All of our investment was lost.”

“Oh, Father.” Frances swallowed hard. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was ashamed.” Her father closed his eyes briefly. “I have tried to make the best of it, but my brother has been supporting us these past months, and I can no longer ask him to cover our expenses.”

Frances flushed at the idea of Amelia’s father covering the cost of her shoes and bonnets. How Amelia must have been laughing at her! Her fist tightened in the horse’s mane. The beast snorted.

“What will we do?” Frances asked.

“I am afraid there are only two roads forward. Our only options are to use your dowry to cover our living expenses -,”

Frances’ breath caught in her throat. If she lost her dowry, it was likely she would lose her place in high society. A young girl with a poor father and no prospects would hardly keep receiving the sorts of invitations she had become so accustomed to. She would do anything, she thought, to save herself that humiliation.

“- or I fear it may be time for us to make a match for you, as soon as possible.”

“You mean, I will have to get married?”

"I do." Her father looked at her gently. "It is about time, my dear. Your cousin is lately engaged, and aside from ensuring you will be settled for life, it is the natural next step for you."

Frances didn't know what to think. Of course, she hoped she would marry one day, like every young girl she had always dreamed of it, but she had wanted to marry for love not for money. Yet if she had to choose between losing everything - her friends, her social life, perhaps even her family home - and marrying someone for convenience, then it was simple. She and her father had worked hard to build a good, comfortable life after her mother's death, and Frances had no intention of losing it. She would rather be married than poor. She let out a long breath.

"Of course, Father." She turned away, trying not to show him her disappointment. "I think I'll go back in and check on Amelia."

She had no real intention of doing so, however. She just needed a moment to collect her thoughts, but as soon as she entered the velvet roped area for the Beau Monde, Amelia spotted her and smiled cruelly.

"He finally told you." Amelia twisted a pale blonde curl around her finger and smirked. "I can see it on your face."

"I don't know what you're talking of." Frances accepted a glass of blackberry tonic from a passing server and took a quick gulp.

"I'm talking of your father relying on my father for everything," Amelia laughed nastily. "At least I've had the good sense to engage myself to a wealthy man, but I suppose your future is already set."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, my dear cousin, being a charity case there is only one route for you moving forward it seems." Amelia grinned cruelly. "Servitude."

"Servitude!"

"Don't worry, you'll always have a place in my household." Amelia leaned forward, whispering, "I need a new ladies maid, or perhaps a governess soon enough!"

Frances took another gulp of tonic and tried to fight back her anger. Taking a slow breath, she turned back to her cousin.

“You are delusional,” she said calmly. “I will find someone perfectly suitable to marry, and then you’ll never be able to say such things to me again.”

“I doubt it,” Amelia said snidely. “I think it much more likely you die an old maid. My maid, in fact. I would bet my ring on it.”

She flashed a shiny gold and ruby engagement ring in Frances’ face. Frances lost her temper.

“Really?” she snapped. “Because I’ll take that bet. I bet you that I will marry the richest, most successful man here today!”

“Well, you’re in luck,” Amelia smirked, looking over Frances’ shoulder. “The Duke of Sinclair just arrived.”

Frances swung around. Ralph Wynter, the Duke of Sinclair, glanced around the collected members of high society, seemingly unaware of the way all the women present stared and whispered when he had entered. He had spent the race drinking in the Royal box with the Prince Regent, and Frances had seen him there, standing with many beautiful women.

He had one of those conflicting reputations of well-established men of society: he was a widower - well-liked and trusted, but also known to be a flirtatious womaniser. Frances was sure he only got away with it because he was so handsome. She couldn’t help but stare at him.

He was easily the tallest man in the room, with dark hair and the broad shoulders of an oxford rower, his warm brown eyes beguiling. Then those eyes turned on her. Frances felt a strange spark of energy between them as her eyes fixed his. It was the oddest, most compelling sensation - as if the Duke had looked directly into her soul, and her into his. Flushing from his gaze, she turned away, holding her breath as he brushed past them, very aware that he had looked back over his shoulder towards her as he passed by. It was electrifying.

Amelia snorted into her glass of champagne at her red cheeks. “I think my ring is safe.”

“Don’t be so sure, Amelia,” Frances spoke coldly, trying to ignore the thundering of her heart from the Duke’s eyes, she made a rash promise: “I’ll have him before the year is out.”

Chapter Two

Somerset House, 1817

Ralph looked around the ballroom, half-heartedly admiring the beautiful women who were always milling around him, their lustful eyes and flirtatious smiles following his every movement. He knew he could have any of them, but the idea seemed tiresome to him this evening.

“What’s the matter, Wynter?” the man standing beside him asked. “Don’t see anything you like?”

He noticed how ears pricked up at the man’s words and was not surprised. After all, his companion on this evening was none other than George the Fourth, future King of England and currently the Prince Regent. Usually, the Prince Regent didn’t attend balls of the public occasion, but the summer Queen Anne’s ball was the highlight of the season for the Ton. Young ladies were presented for the first time and it was imperative that a representative of the royal family attend. Besides, George liked for the young women to see and admire him. Though often joked that it seemed like many of their admiring gazes were spent on his dear friend, Duke Ralph Wynter of Sinclair.

“Not this evening,” Ralph sipped his brandy. “Perhaps I’ll have more luck at the club later tonight.”

Ralph and George preferred to socialise in private clubs in London, the sort of places where the women were professionals, their company discreet, and their tender embrace only for the night.

“Still, you must have a dance or two,” George elbowed him jovially. “Have to show these young things you’re not an old man yet!”

“But I am an old man,” Ralph joked. “I have ten years on most of these girls.”

“Honestly, Wynter, no one would believe you were not yet thirty, the way you go on as if life has passed you by already,” George tutted. “It’s time to find yourself another wife.”

Ralph sighed, but didn’t answer. This was a common comment from his friends and family, but he knew he wasn’t ready. What was the point of dancing with a young pretty thing tonight, only to break her heart tomorrow? That was the trouble with these younger society women; they were all looking for love, romance, courting, but Ralph didn’t have any love to give them. Part of his soul had died with his wife, Lowenna, and he knew it was never coming back. Society assumed that he was mourning, but the truth was much harder. It was much better to settle for a night of comfort in the arms of a friendly woman at the club, knowing they would never demand of him, what he was unwilling and unable to give.

“What do you think of the Marquess Huntley’s new bride?” George leaned closer, hiding his words behind his brandy glass. “One of Lord Fortescue’s children. Amelia, I believe.”

Ralph looked to where George was pointing. A slim, pretty girl stood by the windows, a haughty expression on her face. She couldn’t be more than eighteen, and Marquess Huntley was over forty. Ralph found it strange that such a young girl would desire such an old man. It must be his purse that made him attractive. That was another thing Ralph couldn’t bear, the way young ladies looked at himself as if he were a walking cheque book. It was insulting to consider, but finer bred ladies still had cheques and balances in mind. Why should they not? He thought, self-deprecatingly. An old widower like you, what do you have to offer a young lady apart from money?

“Quite a pretty thing, isn’t she?” George continued to comment. “But not anything to write home about. Still, she came with a handsome dowry.”

Ralph watched listlessly as another young woman came and stood beside the new bride of Marquess Huntley, holding two glasses of champagne. Ralph’s heart lurched as he recognised the woman he had seen at the Royal Ascot. He could never forget that fiery auburn hair and those glittering amber eyes. He had been surprised how clearly

she had stuck in his mind, even invading his private dreams. He still had no idea of her name.

“Who’s that with her?” he couldn’t help asking George. The Prince Regent knew everyone in society.

“Who?” He noticed George’s curious smile and tried to ignore it. “Oh, that’s Baron Fortescue’s daughter, Frances, I believe. The two girls are cousins.”

“I see.”

George had been right in his assessment; however harsh it had seemed. She may be pretty compared to others but standing next to her cousin, Amelia Fortescue could be deemed very plain. Her figure was childish and lean beside Frances’ womanly silhouette, her hair limp and dull beside Frances’ springy and shining curls. Her face was thin and grumpy next to Frances’ rosy cheeks and excited eyes. Ralph became aware of George watching him and knew what was coming next.

“Come, I would like to meet them myself,” George said.

Ralph had a distinct feeling that the Prince Regent was engineering the situation, but he had no choice in the matter and obediently followed him. By the time they had crossed the room, Baron Fortescue had joined his daughter and niece. As a royal, the Prince Regent had the impeccable ability to appear as if he knew everybody intimately even if he had only made their acquaintance once in his life. He strode immediately forward to shake the Baron’s hand. Both young ladies dropped into reverential curtsies, too overwhelmed to meet the eyes of the Prince in front of them.

“Good evening, Your Highness,” the Baron said. “May I introduce to you my daughter, Miss Frances Fortescue, and my niece, Miss Amelia Fortescue, soon to be Marchioness of Huntley.”

“A pleasure to meet you, dear ladies.”

The Prince Regent bowed to both women, smiling the smile that had bedded many women during their friendship. Ralph had come to recognise it clearly and found himself oddly hoping that Frances Fortescue wasn’t the type to lust after a Prince. For if she was willing,

he knew George would happily have her. He noticed how Amelia seemed to simmer under George's gaze, and was strangely relieved to see that Frances did not. Instead, he could have sworn that her liquid brown eyes focused on himself. George turned to him, his inquiring eyes darting between the pretty girl that Ralph couldn't take his eyes off and Ralph's face.

He smiled, pleased with himself, and said, "Let me introduce to you my good friend, Lord Ralph Wynter, the Duke of Sinclair."

Ralph bowed to both women, steeling himself for their perusal. He was familiar with the greed that crossed their faces that made them so much less flattering to him. At least a whore was honest about wanting his money. However, in this instance, he found that as soon as his eyes met Frances', he couldn't look away. There was no lustful greed to be found, only sweetness and honesty.

On closer inspection, her eyes were not brown, not truly, more of a golden amber colour that reminded him of honey. Unlike her cousin who was wearing a fashionable, buttery yellow gown with a froth of lace obscuring the bosom, Frances was wearing a simple blue dress with a square cut, peasants style neckline that had been favoured by ladies a few months ago, with only a thin trim of silver lace at the top of the bodice. As she curtsied to him, he was struck by a rush of desire so sudden it surprised him, the delicate slope of her creamy breasts clearly revealed to him as she dipped.

He swallowed hard and looked away, his mind suddenly blank except for his outrageous imagination. He looked up at the chandelier, trying to distract himself from her. He let George steer the conversation, listening to the small talk about Marquess Huntley's horse at Ascot and trying not to let his eyes drift to Frances. He noticed how her eyes lit up with excitement at George's words, how she dived into conversation with such innocent enthusiasm that it made something inside him ache. He realised with a detached curiosity that he wanted her, more badly than he wanted the transactional embraces of women who he had employed to make him forget his loss and pain.

It didn't give him joy, instead, as the memories of his marriage rose up inside him; the passions, the harsh words, and bitter ending. It was too much. He made his excuses, trying to ignore the confused look on Frances' face, and walked away, stepping quickly out onto the balcony where he could feel the relief of the cold air on his face. He sighed,

leaning his back against the wall, trying to understand why he felt so rattled by this sweet, pretty girl.

Then he realised. His wife had been like Frances once, a hopeful gem of society - before their failing marriage had taken the light out of her. He had done that. He glanced through the window, watching from afar. That was all he could do. A lovely girl like that, ten years his junior, full of joy and virtue, was not for him.

Chapter Three

Frances watched the Duke of Sinclair's quick exit and was frustrated by his actions. This had been their first formal introduction. She had hoped they might at least have some conversation, but he had made his apologies and left, and only as she had begun to speak. Perhaps he disliked her? She doubted it, based on how his eyes had lingered on hers so intently. Frances didn't consider herself vain, not really, not like Amelia who was obsessed with new fashions as if they were military regimens she must follow, but she was possessed with the type of self-confidence only security and a loving father could provide. She trusted in her own beauty and had learned well how to read the signs of gentlemen's attraction. The Duke was certainly attracted to her, it seemed, but it had not been enough to keep his attention. She didn't quite understand why.

"Do not worry for my friend, Miss Fortescue," the Prince Regent said, noticing where she looked with a sardonic smile. "My dear Wynter is not the most sociable of men."

"Understandable." Her father nodded sympathetically. "Duchess Sinclair must be hard woman to forget. A man does not recover from such a blow easily, even if he has his little daughter to remind him of his dear wife."

He smiled at Frances and she squeezed her father's arm in response, but her mind was not on her own loss of her mother, but the loss of the statuesque, firm-faced man in the corner of the ballroom. How hard it must have been for him to lose his wife, his whole future turned to smoke, and to be left to raise his daughter alone. She realised with a jolt that his daughter must have been around the same age as she was when she lost her own mother. She remembered how hard it had been for her, and her heart went out to the Duke's young daughter.

“And yet he has never remarried,” Amelia commented, flicking her eyes to Frances significantly. “Does he intend to honour her memory forever, I wonder? That would be blow to many ladies.”

“Indeed, it would! I wish he would marry - the little Lady Wynter deserves a good role model.” The Prince Regent sighed. “I dearly wish to see him remarried. Marriage is a blessing for us all, is it not?”

These words were deeply ironic to all present. The Prince Regent was famously separated from his wife and engaged a series of long-term mistresses from the highest echelons of society, and countless fair bedwarmers from the lowest of them. Still, he did not seem to be made awkward by his own words, and instead turned to Baron Fortescue.

“You must be pleased for your niece. She has made a fine match in the Marquess of Huntley,” he said, his eyes sliding towards Amelia who giggled. Frances rolled her eyes. Amelia was much too soft-headed when it came to men of power.

“I’m sure your own sweet daughter will soon follow?”

“Indeed.” Her father patted her hand paternally. “Frances is now of a suitable age. I had hoped to speak of it with yourself, Your Majesty.”

“Well, then let us discuss it.” The Prince Regent’s eyes twinkled. “Excuse us, dear ladies.”

The gentlemen bowed, leaving Frances and Amelia alone together.

“If you think your father will manage to talk the Prince Regent into supporting your bid for the Duke of Sinclair, you’ve another thing coming.” Amelia tossed her curls arrogantly. “You’ll be matched up with some minor lord before the evening is out.”

Amelia smiled as if the thought of being stationed high above Frances for the rest of her life was deeply satisfying. Frances stiffened her back and shook her own hair back, noticing with pride how Amelia glanced enviously at her naturally buoyant curls.

“We’ll see, won’t we?” she said sweetly. “If you’ll excuse me, Amelia, I see my friend, Lady Catherine.”

Frances left Amelia frowning in her wake and walked around the circle of dancers to meet her friend, Catherine Bowles, who stood by the beautifully decorated food table, great terrines of white soup and plates of delicate pastries surrounded by colourful fruit and flower arrangements. Catherine smiled mischievously to see her friend and held out both her gloved hands for Frances to take.

“Have you seen who’s here?” Catherine whispered. “The Countess of Jersey! She and the Prince Regent were intimately involved, you know. You just met him-” Catherine lowered her voice, “did he try to seduce you? He makes eyes at all the young ladies, you know. He once offered me a “walk” in the garden!”

This was Catherine in a nutshell. She was a year older than Frances, very adept at moving through society and making connections, friendly and beautiful with dark eyes and dark hair, but the most unforgivable gossip. Yet, Frances was sure that whatever she told her friend would be held in perfect confidence. She was loyal underneath it all.

“No, he didn’t, and I wouldn’t have accepted if he had,” Frances said, popping a small berry tart into her mouth. “I have other ... things on my mind.”

“Is that so?” Catherine’s eyebrows shot up. She knew what that meant. She immediately flicked open her fan, hiding their faces behind it. “Have you someone in mind?”

“I need to make a match,” Frances whispered to her friend. “Father says it’s time to get married.”

“Aha, and you’d like to ensure he chooses a suitor you prefer. I can help with that.”

Catherine nodded wisely. She’d coached many maids to the alter and had used her impressive powers of persuasion to seduce Baron Bowles, to whom she had been wed at Michaelmas.

“Who do you have in mind?” She whispered, her eyes darting over the crowd.

Frances took a deep breath and then let her eyes drift and linger on the duke’s handsome face.

“Goodness, Frances, you’ve set your sights high!” Catherine whispered, following her gaze. “He’s not only extremely eligible but somewhat difficult to impress.”

“I know,” Frances whispered. “He likes to look at me, I think, but when I tried to talk to him...” Frances shrugged. She wasn’t sure what more there could be to do than that.

“Oh Frances, you are so naive sometimes!” Catherine laughed. “There is much more to catch a husband than simply looking pretty and being engaging in conversation! Even if you are the prettiest face in the room.” Catherine smiled generously at her friend. “We’ll have to be a little more devious in order to throw you in his path. Hmm.”

Catherine narrowed her eyes and looked around the room, thoughtfully, then her eyes lit up. “I have it! Come with me.”

She linked arms with Frances and pulled her the other side of a room, lifting a white-gloved hand to wave at a tiny woman holding court with a circle of the most fashionable ladies of London.

“My dear, Lady Adley,” Catherine smiled. “How are you this evening?”

“Oh, suffering this boredom with ease, Lady Bowles.”

Lady Adley rolled her glossy, emerald eyes, her sleek golden hair shining in a fashionable chignon. The women surrounding her burst into tittering, sycophantic giggles. Frances noticed the way they all looked at her admiringly, their faces slightly fearful. Even without the stylish gown and excessive diamonds she wore, Frances could tell she was in the presence of a woman of influence.

“Who is your acquaintance?”

Frances couldn’t help but flush slightly as those playful, shrewd eyes rested on her face. She dropped into a curtsy.

“This is my dear friend, Miss Frances Fortescue,” Catherine squeezed her arm. “I have been meaning to introduce you. I think you will find her most engaging, and perhaps suitable for you-”

Frances pinched Catherine's arm in question at her words, but Catherine only pinched back, warning her to be quiet. She turned to her with mischief in her shiny brown eyes.

"Frances, this is the Lady Arabella Adley, sister of the Duke of Sinclair."

Frances tried not to let her excitement show on her face. Lady Arabella was famous for her extravagant lifestyle, her charity work and her notoriously short temper. Frances hoped she could impress her, but she had no idea how to.

"Indeed?" Lady Arabella raised an arched, blonde eyebrow, as if daring Frances to entertain her.

"Oh yes!" Catherine gushed. "Frances has your same single-minded view on life, my friend. Frances, tell Lady Arabella what happened when you were coming out and your father thought you should wear a more old-fashioned dress than you desired?"

"Well, I -,"

Frances wasn't sure what Catherine was doing. This was hardly a flattering story and certainly not one she would want to get back to her future husband, but Catherine nodded, egging her on.

"- I took the old-fashioned dress and put it on the dog. It ran around the courtyard until it was too ruined to wear."

Frances finished shamefacedly. The ladies around her muttered between themselves, shocked at such an unladylike description but Lady Arabella only looked fascinated.

"Truly?" She waved her exotic peacock fan in front of her face. "What did your father say?"

"Well, I took it off the dog before it could see and then claimed the poor beast had stolen it and dragged it around itself." Frances shrugged, offering no defence for her stubbornness. "He bought me a new gown."

"Oh my, that is too good!" Lady Arabella burst into laughter. "You are

right, Lady Catherine, I do like her. She might suit me nicely!"

"I had thought so." Catherine fluttered her fan smugly. Lady Arabella turned back to Frances.

"Tell me, Frances, are you married?"

"Not yet, my lady."

"Oh please, call me Arabella." She waved her fan and gripped Frances' hand, linking arms with her and pulling her away from the small crowd. Catherine widened her eyes over Arabella's head, nodding encouragingly.

"I have a situation that might interest you." Arabella lowered her voice. "I've been looking for a companion to help assist me with my charity work. Not a meek, débutante you understand, but a girl with wit and determination." Arabella looked at her significantly. "I think you might be just right."

"Thank you, my lady."

"This is what I propose." Arabella stopped them walking by the window seat and sat down, squaring her tiny shoulders to look up at Frances. "Come and stay with me for a few months, assist me in my work, be my companion, and I will put my efforts into finding a man worthy of you in exchange."

"Oh, what a generous offer!" Frances said, thinking quickly through her options. Perhaps staying with the duke's sister would help her prospects, but perhaps it might hinder them. What if she kept Frances away from society and she had no chance to socialise with him?

"Where is your estate, if you don't mind me asking?" Frances asked. "I have never stayed away from home."

"Oh, myself and my son live with my brother, at Sinclair Manor outside London." Arabella waved her hand dismissively. "Do not worry, it is only a day's journey from your own father's estate. You could never be homesick. Does that seem suitable?"

Frances couldn't believe her luck. Here was her opportunity to

socialise with the Duke - intimately. She smiled widely at Arabella, receiving a satisfied grin in response.

“It seems eminently suitable, Arabella,” Frances said. “I happily accept your proposition.”

Chapter Four

“Who is the lady who is coming to stay?” Matilda asked, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, tugging hard on Ralph’s hand.

“Her name is Miss Fortescue.” Ralph tugged his daughter away from the window. “Come, Matilda, practise your piano instead of watching.”

“But who is Miss Fortescue?” Matilda demanded.

“One of my mother’s charity cases,” Philip muttered from behind a newspaper in the corner. Ralph frowned at his nephew.

“What’s a charity case?” Matilda asked.

“Ignore your cousin, he was only joking.” Ralph petted Matilda’s face. “Miss Fortescue is a friend of Aunt Arabella’s.”

“Well, I should hardly call her a friend, Ralph.” Arabella walked into the room, dressed elegantly in a gold and red gown, her blonde hair glowing lustrously. “But I have need of a girl to help with the charity work I do, and since you’ll hardly agree to have a servant help me -,”

“The servants have their own work, Arabella,” Ralph said lightly, hardly in the mood for a row. His sister had a nasty of habit of worrying on an issue for days on end until he relented. He was in no mood for it today. He was already on edge with the idea of Frances Fortescue staying under his roof.

“Miss Fortescue will work for my aunt?” Matilda asked, confused.

“No, Miss Fortescue will be your Aunt’s companion, her guest.”

“Just hers?” Matilda’s little face fell, her sweet blue eyes threatening to fill with tantrum tears. “But I want her to be my guest, too!”

“For goodness sake,” Philip sighed, rolling his eyes.

Ralph frowned at him. Matilda often seemed to bother Philip. He was not a child-friendly man, and having an active, sociable nine-year-old girl around the house was clearly putting a strain on his patience. Ralph felt no sympathy, only defensive on Matilda’s behalf. This was her house, and if his ill-mannered nephew didn’t like it, he could go. He raised his eyebrows at Arabella, silently signalling to his sister that she needed to check her son. She glanced away from looking at her reflection in the mirror to Philip.

“Now, now, Matilda is quite right,” Arabella scolded with a light laugh. “Miss Fortescue will be all of our guests, won’t she, Philip?”

“Well, she’s not mine,” Philip said.

“We will all treat your mother’s guest with the proper decorum,” Ralph snapped.

Philip rolled his eyes at his uncle and Ralph snorted, glaring at Arabella. Ralph was annoyed by his nephew’s bad temper and presumption. Matilda crept back to the window, sensing the changing winds of a potential argument.

“Philip! Pay attention to your uncle.” His mother’s hard tone made Philip put down his newspaper and gaze indolently up at them like a surly boy.

“Yes, Uncle?”

It was a shame he was not a boy, Ralph thought suddenly. For if he were, he would be well within his rights to give him a beating. He scowled at his nephew.

“You might at least show some interest in your mother’s work,” he snapped. “Rather than spending my money on art and books!”

“Come now, brother, Philip is a young man, exploring the world,” Arabella soothed. She could never chide her son for long and Ralph

fought the urge to tell her so.

“He’s twenty-years-old! How much more exploring does he need to do?” Ralph said.

“Mother says I can go to Holland in the summer,” Philip said languishing back. “For my education.”

“For more tom-foolery, more like it,” Ralph said, under his breath. Then louder, to his sister, “Why is he not married?”

“He’s still young! He has plenty of time!” Arabella exclaimed, clutching at her son, her gloved hand stroking his slight hair. It was ironic, Ralph thought, since Philip’s hairline was receding.

“I was married at eighteen,” Ralph said. “You were married and had brought him into the world -” Ralph jerked his head at Philip, “- by that age. We both married young.”

“And look where it got us,” Arabella snapped. “The widow Adley, and the Widowed Wynter!”

Ralph winced. He instinctively glanced towards Matilda at the window, hoping she had not heard anything. Arabella stared at him; her eyebrow raised defiantly.

“Fine, fine,” he held up his hands, conceding for the sake of peace. “Let’s talk no more of it.”

Arabella nodded, satisfied, and Philip disappeared back behind his newspaper with a smirk. Ralph turned to the mantelpiece and stared into the empty fire grate, thinking on Arabella’s words. His older sister had always been able to cut to the quick of his pain and sadness. She was nine years his senior, he and she the only surviving children of the Wynter line. There had been other brothers and sisters in infancy, but each one had been lost to one childhood illness after another until only the two of them remained.

By the time he had gone up to Oxford, she was already married and had borne Philip, who was only eight years Ralph’s junior. They might have grown apart, if their marriages had endured. Just as Matilda had been born, Lord Adley had passed away suddenly, Arabella had become a widow, and dependent on his kindness. He had set

Arabella up with a townhouse in London. She had been disappointed not to live at Sinclair Manor with his family, but they had only lived in the townhouse temporarily.

Five years later the worst happened, and Matilda lost her mother. Arabella stepped into the void at Sinclair Manor, running the house like its mistress had done when Ralph could not even rise from his bed. He should be grateful to her, and most of the time he was, but he also felt the chafing burden of his situation. This had never been the plan. When he had married, he had never considered that ten years later, he would be widowed, the father of a daughter, and living with his sister and her bratty son.

He closed his eyes and breathed through a rush of mourning. It wasn't supposed to be this way. *This is what you deserve, an insidious voice inside*, his head said. *This is what you brought upon yourself with what you did.*

"She's arrived!" Matilda squealed, jerking Ralph out of his reverie. "She's here!" Matilda set off at full tilt, lifting her white skirt around her knees to reveal her blue stockings as she ran out of the parlour to the main hallway.

"Matilda, wait!" Ralph called, following his daughter and gesturing for Arabella and Philip to stay where they were. "I'll show her in."

Matilda was jumping up and down by the main door as the carriage approached, grabbing onto the sleeve of Holton, Ralph's personal butler and confidante.

"We never have guests to stay, Holton!" Matilda squeaked. "I'm so excited, aren't you excited?"

"I'm very excited," Holton said in a deadpan tone, catching Ralph's eye over Matilda's head with a sarcastic twinkle in his eye. Ralph smirked at his friend. Holton and Ralph may be butler and master, but the two had grown up together. Holton's father had been butler to the late Duke of Sinclair and both men had groomed their sons for their respective positions. Consequently, Ralph Wynter and Bartholomew Holton were bonded not only by background and position, but also by mutual respect. There was no man on earth Ralph would trust more.

Since the death of his father when he was nineteen-years-old, Ralph

had ascended to the Dukedom and Holton had been his right-hand man in everything. He had seen Ralph at his worst, kept all his secrets, and he loved Matilda as if she were his own.

“Come.” Holton bent down and offered Matilda his arm as if she were a grown lady. “Shall we go and greet your very first house guest?”

Ralph hid his smile as Matilda lifted her little head proudly and took Holton’s arm as if she were walking into a society ball. They were so endearing, the two of them together, his best friend and his precious daughter. Holton was the most disciplined servant in the house in every regard - except when it came to Matilda. She could bend him around her little finger, and it warmed Ralph’s heart to see it. He looked up as the carriage pulled up on the drive and stepped out onto the stone steps to take hold of Matilda’s hand.

Holton stepped back, as was appropriate, but still close enough so Ralph could hear his low tone, “Lady Adley did not mention how long her guest would be staying,” Holton said. “Do you know, my Lord?”

“No, I don’t. I’m sorry, Holton.” Ralph shook his head. He disliked guests and all the trouble they brought for the servants of the household. “I suppose we shall just have to prepare for a long visit.”

The carriage stopped, the horses pawing their great feet in the gravel and tossing their heads. A simple bonnet adorned with pink and white flowers emerged from the carriage, and then Frances unfolded herself, dressed in a matching white dress with a pink print, the gusts of the wind along the drive blew it against her legs so for a moment, her form beneath was made clear. Ralph gulped and averted his eyes. She was not only as beautiful as he remembered, she was more so. At the ball she had been dressed elegantly and shone like a jewel. Now she was dressed simply and seemed to radiate the softness of a spring flower. He watched as Holton moved forward to greet her and direct the other servants to unload her trunks. For the moment Ralph was completely unmanned, unable to move.

Dear God, she’s just an eighteen-year-old girl! He scolded himself. *Get a grip, man!*

“Father?” Matilda tugged at his hand, distracting him from his internal dressing-down. He noticed her little eyes were as round as saucers.

“Yes, my dear?”

“She’s so pretty,” Matilda whispered. “I think the prettiest lady I’ve ever seen. Like a fairy princess.”

Ralph swallowed hard. “Indeed.”

He dropped Matilda’s hand and bowed in front of Frances.

“Miss Fortescue, welcome to Sinclair Manor.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Frances dropped into a curtsey. Ralph noticed an endearing blush starting on her collarbones. “You did not need to come and greet me.”

“Oh, actually it - it was not me who -,”

“It was me!” Matilda piped up, coming out from behind her father and lowering herself into a shaky, but respectable curtsey. “It is very nice to meet you, Miss Fortescue. I am Lady Matilda Wynter.”

Ralph felt absurdly proud of his daughter and watched as Frances’ face split into a wide smile. Frances dropped down so she was the same height as his daughter and said, “What a pleasure to meet you, Lady Wynter! You can call me Frances.”

“Really?” Matilda grinned from ear to ear. “Will you call me Matilda?”

“If you would like, and your father permits it.” Frances glanced up to check, Ralph nodded silently.

“I think I should like you to call me Tilly,” Matilda announced.

Ralph raised his eyebrows. His daughter only reserved this nickname for people she really liked. Himself, his late wife, and her nursery maid were the only people in the world entitled to use it. Arabella had tried it once and Matilda had refused to answer her.

“Well, then I shall call you Tilly!” Frances laughed. “Perhaps we’ll think of a new nickname for me, also.”

“I will think of one!” Matilda grabbed Frances’ hand, pulling her

forwards. "Come and see my room, I want to show you my dolls!"

"Matilda, Miss Fortescue must meet with your aunt and cousin first," Ralph reminded her.

"But my dolls are much more interesting!" Matilda's face fell, threatening a disagreement. She could be as stubborn as her aunt when she wanted to be.

Frances laughed and reached a hand up to loosen her bonnet ribbons. She removed it, revealing her curling auburn hair that glowed red as a rose in the morning light.

"Here." She offered it to a wide-eyed Matilda. "If you take me to see your aunt, you can wear my bonnet."

"Really?" Matilda put it on her head where it immediately fell down in front of her eyes. She turned her blind face to her father. "Am I as pretty as Miss Fortescue now?"

"You are the prettiest little girl in the whole world," Ralph said, pushing the bonnet back off her face and smiling. "Show Miss Fortescue into the parlour for me."

"Yes, Father!" Matilda skipped forward, pulling her new friend with her. Frances took it in a very good-natured way and Ralph couldn't help but smile as she let herself be tugged along by her nine-year-old captor, laughing all the way.

"She is a pleasant young lady."

Ralph turned to see Holton watching Frances and Matilda disappear back into the house. Matilda's giggles echoed down the hall. Ralph nodded.

"She is indeed."

He waited until he heard the loud exclamations of his sister welcoming Frances in the drawing-room and then sighed. He turned his sights away from the house, over the blue skies and green lawns of his estate.

“I shall take a walk. I’ll be by the lake if you should need me, Holton.”

“You will not go back to the parlour?”

“No. I need a walk.”

Ralph couldn’t stand the idea of socialising with Frances and Arabella at the moment. He would have to keep a careful watch on himself that he didn’t look at Frances too much. If Arabella noticed, she would pester him about it. As he lengthened his stride across, he gave himself a firm talking to.

Get a hold of yourself, man! It’s not like you to be turned by a pretty head. As if such a young girl would think of you!

He would just have to avoid her as much as possible. It shouldn’t be hard, surely Arabella would keep her busy enough with all her charity work and it wasn’t as if the girl was really his guest. He drew a deep breath, trying to calm his irritation. Marching on, trying to drive all thoughts of the playful, vibrant woman he had seen out of his mind.

Chapter Five

“*H*ow do you like Sinclair Manor, Frances?”

Arabella looked at Frances over the top of her fine porcelain teacup, her eyes sparkling.

“Oh, very much,” Frances gushed as Philip, Arabella’s son, offered her a plate of fine pastries. Frances took them and noticed the sour look he gave her. She sighed inwardly and thought that her real answer to Arabella’s question might be. *I like it well enough when I can play with Matilda and entertain myself, but when I must sit with this nitwit, it’s a thorough bore!* Philip Adley might be heir to a grand fortune and technically very eligible, but he was dull and obnoxious. She ignored Philip and smiled at Arabella.

“I think it might be the most beautiful house I’ve ever seen,” she answered simply.

“It must be very luxurious compared to your little home,” he said, pushing his spectacles up his nose.

Frances bristled a little. Philip was very superior for a man who had no great fortune, a sour face and was losing his hair. Frances knew he must only be a few years older than her, but he had none of the vibrancy of youth that other men his age did, so she could not understand where he got the gall to sneer at her so.

“Oh, really?” Frances bit down on a pastry, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Come now, Philip, you must not jest with Miss Frances!” Arabella laughed. “The Fortescue Manor is very grand, I am told. Your great grandfather was the architect, was he not?”

“He was.” Frances was grateful for Lady Arabella. She seemed to be the only person able to temper her son’s ignorance. “It is a very well-proportioned house.”

“Oh yes?” Philip didn’t lift his eyes from his newspaper. “Well, it takes more than bricks and mortar. One’s property must be artistically populated to be considered truly refined. I just acquired this piece -,” he gestured to a truly ugly portrait behind him. “- an unknown Vermeer.” He looked up at Frances blankly. “Oh, I suppose you are not aware of the masters?”

Frances tried to take a deep breath. *The nerve of his assumption!*

“I am, actually,” Frances said. “My father paints, and he taught me everything he knows.”

Philip wrinkled his nose. “I despise a hobbyist.”

“Philip!” Arabella laughed as if Philip had something funny and not insulting. “Frances’ father is a gifted artist, and studied under the great Joshua Reynolds.”

“Yes, he did.” Frances swallowed some tea to calm her anger.

“Did he acquire any of his great works?” Philip asked.

Frances hesitated. She was not sure he deserved the truth. “Not exactly.”

“I suppose when you have such a superior talent in the family you have no need of portraits from the masters,” Arabella said, smiling at them both. “We may have a gallery to some of the greats here, but I doubt it compares to the sweet satisfaction of seeing your own family’s work on the walls.”

Philip snorted into his tea, and Frances glared at him, saying nothing. This was something Arabella often did. She wasn’t snide like Philip, but she was condescending. Frances often found herself biting back rude retorts and instead imagining how she would write it down later in her diary:

Why, the very nerve of it! Suggesting that Father had no need of great

paintings as if the halls at home weren't decked out with original sketches! I'd like to march Philip around his gallery and watch his eyes bulge as he saw Mr Reynolds' original works sitting there!

"It is very satisfactory," she said, making her voice deliberately sweet. "You see, Father paints in so many different styles, he's given me quite an education. For instance, I can tell you that so-called Vermeer -," She nodded to the painting Philip had boasted about. "- cannot possibly be truthfully done by the Dutch master. The brush strokes are all wrong."

"What?" Philip turned to look at it. "I was assured it was genuine!"

Frances shook her head, smiling at them from over her teacup with such satisfaction. she would have liked to laugh at the pair of them. Philip looked stunned, annoyed even, but Arabella was smiling. She clapped her hands in delight.

"Well done, Frances! It is so wonderful having an educated woman in the house to play with!" She sighed. "Sadly, society women are so often dull as fish in this regard, won't share an opinion on anything, but you're not like that." Arabella patted her hand sympathetically, smiling. "It's a credit to your humble upbringing, really, the stretch of your education."

Frances gritted her teeth and smiled in response. Conversation with Arabella was like fencing. When you were sure you had scored a point, she turned it into her own. She was always ready with a comeback. Sometimes, there was no other civilised route than to beat a retreat. Frances dabbed her napkin to her lips, daintily.

"Well, I shall take the Duke a cup of tea, I think."

Frances rose, pouring a cup as she knew the Duke liked it and setting it on a small tray with some slices of lemon beside. She had been watching the butler, Holton, over the last few days and had observed the Duke's habits.

Philip and Arabella watched her with smirking smiles, taking her actions as evidence of her less elevated background. *More fool them*, Frances thought gleefully. Whilst they assumed she was simply being homely, she was winning herself time alone with the Duke. She and Arabella were spending many hours holed up together, planning a

charity gathering at the manor the following week. The remaining time she had after that was quickly claimed by Matilda. She needed to make the most of these small moments she could catch a moment with the Duke.

She stopped in the hallway, checking her reflection in the huge, gilded mirror above a mahogany sideboard. She was wearing one of her favourite day dresses, a soft aquamarine cotton affair with blue ribbon trim under the bust and on the sleeves. She adjusted herself quickly, pulling her dress down and twisting a few red curls around her face with her finger to make herself look fresher and alluring. Satisfied, she knocked gently at the large study door and listened for the strong call of:

“Come in.”

“Good morning, Your Grace.” She pushed open the door brightly, smiling despite the Duke’s sullen expression.

“Oh. Miss Fortescue.” He lifted his pen and turned back to his work. “There really is no need for you to bring my tea to me every day.”

“Arabella asked me to,” Frances lied quickly. “It’s no trouble.”

She carefully approached the enormous oak desk. She had been doing this every morning for a week, noticing as she set the tray down before him that his eyes always drifted over her figure - before darting away. Despite her persistent efforts however, they were still yet to have a proper conversation.

Most of the words they had exchanged so far, had been on her arrival, and most of those had been through Matilda. She had initially held high hopes that they might bond over spending time with the lovely little girl (Frances had always been very competent with children) but she quickly noticed that he shut himself up in the study most of the day and only came out for supper which was a very formal, sedate affair under Arabella’s distinguished dictation.

The Duke would be seated silently at the head of the table, eat, and then excuse himself for work. They might as well not be living in the same house! Today was the day, Frances decided. Today was the day she would get to talk to him properly. This was her best day dress and her hair was particularly shiny today. He would have to speak to her!

She held her breath as she set the tea tray down, glancing quickly to see what his face was doing, but he wasn't even looking at her! His furrowed brow was fixated on the letter in front of him. Now even her beauty wasn't distracting him! She sighed to herself, at a loss. Catherine had been right. It would take more than her pretty face to catch a man like the Duke. She needed to find some way to impress him. She cast her eye around the room trying to discern a shared interest and then her eye fell on a painting, leaning against a bookcase, ready to be hung. The lacklustre brushwork was familiar.

"Oh no!"

"What is it?" The Duke demanded, frowning at the interruption.

"Oh, nothing, I'm sorry," Frances turned to face him, her cheeks red with embarrassment. "It's only... well," she gestured to the painting. "I see you have unfortunately been taken in by the same forger who hoodwinked your nephew. It's - it's definitely not a Vermeer."

"Oh, is that what you're shouting about?" He frowned. "I know."

"You know?" Frances was stunned. "Did you know when it was bought?"

"Of course not," the Duke tried to return to his work. "Philip bought them, but I knew the second I looked at them." The Duke eyed them with distaste. "Sadly, my nephew has all the enthusiasm for buying art, and none of the refinement for appreciating it."

"And you let him believe it was genuine?" Frances didn't see how anyone could be taken in by such sloppy brushwork, but she would never let a forger get away with such deception.

"Well, he can hardly recoup the money, can he?" The Duke looked up at her quickly. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

"Uh, yes, I did actually," Frances replied meekly.

"God's bones, I wish you had not!" the Duke groaned, dropping his quill and rubbing his face.

Frances admired his sharp jawbone for a moment before his eyes fixed

on hers again and she asked quickly, "Why?"

"Because Philip has a fondness for spending my money on art," the Duke sighed heavily. "I'd rather not have to pay for the real Vermeer as well. Better, I think, to settle with the fake - than to pay twice for the same piece."

"But they are not the same!" Frances exclaimed. "Any fool with any degree of education will notice they are not genuine!" She pointed at it in amazement. "What kind of gentlemen of standing purchases forgeries willingly?"

"It's not as if I was going to let him display them." The Duke rolled his eyes. "At least not in the public rooms."

"But why would you even tolerate it?" Frances wrinkled her nose at the painting. "It is so poorly done. I should hate to look at that every day of my life."

"Well, lucky for you that you don't," the Duke said sharply.

"Lucky for me, indeed." Frances tossed her curls and turned to him, eyebrows raised. "But it seems you do not feel attracted to it, either, given the way you wish to hide it away out of the public eye."

"Is that so?" The Duke tried to turn back to his work, but Frances could see he was distracted. She tried to hold his attention.

"Indeed. You are one of the wealthiest men in society, and you have *adequate* taste." Frances gestured around the study which, while it was a little stern for her taste, was very pleasing dressed with pastoral landscapes which hung between the bookshelves. "Why not buy art that you actually like?"

"You seem remarkably opinionated on the subject for a young lady." The Duke leaned back in his chair, folding his arms defensively. "What business is it of yours what art I buy?"

"Well, to begin with, I'm of the opinion that when one is surrounded by beauty one is ... invigorated by it." She smiled. She noticed the corner of his mouth twitch involuntarily. Was it a repressed smile? Perhaps. She carried on. "And secondly, my father is an artist, so I am always on the lookout for commissions."

The Duke laughed, a sharp, sarcastic bark. “The regular little salesman, aren’t you?”

Frances dropped into an elegant curtsey, undeterred. “At your service, Your Grace. If you are as deficient as your nephew in your artistic purchases, you must allow me to assist you.”

“I don’t think I have ever been called deficient in anything,” the Duke snapped. “I told you I could recognise the fake, did I not?”

“You did, and yet you allowed it into your home.” Frances shook her head, in a play of faux regretfulness. “Such disregard for the masters is hardly an enlightened position.”

“I am unenlightened, am I?” The Duke glowered.

Frances wasn’t afraid. This was the longest conversation they had ever had, and rather than been displeased with her boldness and shutting her down, he had engaged, become enlivened. She was starting to recognise that if there was a Wynter family trait, it was that they all relished an argument. So far, she enjoyed the Duke’s more good-natured approach than the condescension of his sister.

“I couldn’t possibly say, Your Grace.” Frances smiled her prettiest smile. “But if the fake Vermeer fits ...”

The Duke sighed, those dark brows knitting together, and shuffled the papers on his desk. She had clearly run out of goodwill and was about to be dismissed.

“Miss Fortescue, I don’t know who gave you the impression that I am idle at the moment -”

“Frances.”

“What?”

Frances smiled at his disconcerted tone. “You should call me Frances.”

“Why?” he asked, baffled.

She bit her lip to stop herself snorting at his expression. “Because it is

my name.”

The Duke looked entirely blank for a moment, the anger he had been building up clearly completely knocked out of him. Frances would have laughed at his surprised expression if she could. Instead, she tucked her hands behind her, rocking on her heels with suppressed delight and having caught him unguarded for a moment. *Catherine will be so proud of me!* She thought, gleefully.

Then he shook his head a little as if getting rid of a daydream and glared at her. “I thank you for your unsolicited opinions about my artistic taste, but I must return to my work now.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Frances curtsied. “I shall leave you.”

When she walked to the door and turned back, she saw that he had not yet put quill to paper and was, instead, staring at her as she left. She felt her skin prickle with the touch of his gaze and a wave of victorious excitement flooded through her.

“Have a good day.” She smiled and closed the door behind her.

She bounced back up to her chamber as if she was floating on air. Their first conversation! She had managed to break the barrier between them and have a discussion, she was privately encouraged by the results. The Duke was a much better conversationalist than he had appeared at the ball and, whilst he was cranky and stern, he was not dull. She flopped onto her lovely bed in the guest-chamber, pulled her diary out from where she hid it and let her feelings spill onto the page:

He's so handsome when he's angry! Goodness, I think if I can catch him, I'd be so proud to show off such a handsome husband at every ball in the country! Now, I must think of other ways to draw him out....

Chapter Six

Ralph didn't know what to do with himself. Having Frances in the house was driving him to distraction. Wherever he went in the house, there she seemed to be. She had gone so far as to even enter his sacred space, his private study, without so much of a flinch. She brought him tea every morning, despite his consistently brushing her off, and had even started trying to engage him in conversation.

He had looked at her longingly whenever he saw her, with her dresses cut so alluringly across her bosom and her auburn hair shining so bright. She unfailingly captured his attention whenever she walked in the room, but he had not expected her to be so interesting to talk to. It seemed that whatever acerbic response he gave, however abrupt and cold he was, she was always ready for him with an unflappable smile and a witty joke.

She had been there just over a week when Ralph finally thought he had got away for a precious moment and was shut up in his study with Holton, preparing to sign a trade agreement. He tried to concentrate, though far away in the corner of the house he could hear his daughter's laughter.

"I'm sorry, Holton, where were we?" he asked for the third time.

Holton smiled at him. "Distracted, sir?"

"No. Well, a little." Ralph leaned back in his chair, sighing. "It is strange having an additional person in the house."

"Yes sir." Holton nodded. "Miss Fortescue has definitely brought a livelier air into the manor."

"She seems to be everywhere I go!" Ralph groaned. "I do not know

how I'll get anything done."

"Well, she is an active lady." Holton laughed. "She cannot bear to be idle; it seems. She often helps out in small matters."

"Oh?" Ralph tried to appear disinterested but was eager to hear more.

"Yes, she has made friends with Cook and has been giving instructions for a special type of biscuit her mother made for her as a child."

Ralph snorted. "Sounds like the demanding actions of a spoilt girl to me."

Holton shook his head. "No, she is having them made for Matilda."

Ralph frowned, a disquiet spreading through him. He should not judge Frances by other girls of her age.

"She also has taken a little hand in Matilda's education, I believe," Holton continued.

"What?" Ralph glared at Holton. He was particular about Matilda's curriculum. "What can you possibly mean?"

"Well, it is only that Frances is so educated in the fine arts. She has been teaching Matilda what she knows." Holton shrugged. "I saw no harm in it, sir. She is a kind lady, and generous with her knowledge."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. She will make a good mistress for a fine house someday."

And a fine wife for some young gentleman, Ralph thought bitterly. He nodded, unable to voice his discontent, and was turning his attention back to the contract when the door to the study burst open.

"Tilly, you must not -,"

"Daddy! Daddy!" Matilda shouted over Frances, bundling into the room, a rush of ribbons and flying brown hair. The dogs ran around her, the little spaniels yapping away. "Frances is going to teach me to jump the pony! Will you come and watch?"

“Matilda, the dogs! What did I tell you about the dogs?” Ralph shouted, pushing back his chair as a red-fox King Charles twisted itself under his desk. “They are not permitted in the study!”

Hunting hounds were one thing, but these shuffling, doe-eyed creatures always ended up under his feet and he cursed the lot of them. Unfortunately, Matilda had named each and every one, and would not be separated from them.

“But the dogs are coming too, Father.”

Matilda dropped her fatherly endearment at his tone, immediately trying to stand tall and proper. Ralph sighed inwardly and rubbed his face, sitting back down. He looked up, Frances was standing demurely by the door, her head bowed, clearly ready to weather his disagreeable words. He took a deep breath and took his daughters hands. She was already wearing her cold, leather riding gloves.

“Tilly, you are not old enough to jump yet,” he said patiently.

“But Frances is going to teach me how she was taught as a girl,” Matilda wheedled. “Tell him, Franny!”

Franny? Ralph thought to himself. *Good God, she’s getting attached!*

He turned to Frances. “What is this?”

“I’m sorry, Your Grace,” Frances looked up. Ralph tried to ignore how the navy riding coat she wore brought out the reddish quality of her hair. “There has been a miscommunication of sorts. I intend to teach her preparation for jumping, but it is very simple horse training, it involves no actual jumps.” Frances caught Matilda’s eye and grinned. “Yet.”

“Please, Father?” Matilda whined.

“Fine!” Ralph pinched the bridge of his nose. The barking of the dogs was giving him a headache. “Just - just get all the dogs out with you - is this what our partners agreed to, thirty per cent?” He asked Holton, lifting up the document as Frances and Matilda tried to draw all of the spaniels back out with them.

"It is." Bartholomew nodded, scooping up the smallest dog and handing it off to Matilda. "They will give you a thirty per cent profit on imported sugar. You only need to sign here. I will leave it with you."

"You are in sugar?"

Both men turned in surprise at Frances' question. She and Matilda stood in the doorway, Matilda still holding the puppy in her arms. Holton raised his eyebrows, looking between his master and Frances.

"I am." Ralph said. "What of it?"

Frances looked between the two men; her golden eyebrows furrowed.

"Are you not concerned about the abolitionists?"

"What's an abolitionist?" Matilda asked.

"An abolitionist is a person who -,"

"Enough!"

Ralph held up his hand, his jaw set. He was fighting very hard to keep his temper in check. Frances may be sweet and generous with her time, but he would not have anyone interfering in his business, or his family. It was time to set her straight. He turned to his butler.

"Holton, why don't you take Matilda down to the stables? Miss Fortescue will join you shortly."

Holton nodded quickly and took Matilda's hand, leading her out of the study. Matilda obeyed but threw him a pleading look over her shoulder. The door closed behind them and Frances stood in front of him, looking at him without a hint of trepidation.

Somehow, it seemed to ignite his frustration even more, but he clenched his fists to keep his anger in check. He looked at her open, innocent face and the way her reddish-blond curls caught in the firelight. He calmed himself down. She was a young woman, of course, she was idealistic, and she was kind to his daughter. She didn't deserve hard words.

“Miss Fortescue -,”

“It’s Frances.”

He closed his eyes against her interruption and continued.

“Miss Fortescue, I am very grateful for the interest you have shown in my daughter and Matilda clearly enjoys your company, but I do not see how your opinion carries any bearing on my business -,”

“I do.”

“What?” he snapped rudely, then set his hands down on the table in front of him, taking another deep breath. “Forgive me, I mean - what do you mean?”

“I mean that I do think my opinion carries bearing on your business.”

Frances folded her hands in front of her, smiling benignly. Ralph was starting to get the feeling that he was, for want of a better expression, being played.

This girl, he thought. *God save me from this impetuous girl!*

“I am interested in how you have reached that particular conclusion,” he said, gritting his teeth.

“Well, do you know who the primary consumers of sugar in this country are?” Frances tilted her head to the side. “Ladies of high society.”

“Indeed, and in order for you to get sugar in your tea I need to ship it from the colonies.” Ralph lifted the contract. “This is what that enables.”

“But the colonies use slaves to harvest sugar, do they not?” Frances prompted.

“They do. Though I do not see what it has to do with -”

“Well, you will remember those fine ladies that I spoke of, they are often swayed by the court of public opinion.” Frances interrupted.

“You might have noticed recently that there has been quite the disdain for the slave trade.”

“I don’t trade in slaves.” Ralph felt his anger rising again. “And you for to even suggest that I do, and to suggest to my daughter -,”

“You may not, but the sugar is produced by slaves, is it not?” Frances looked at him with those amber eyes. “The fine ladies of high society are interested in these things, Your Grace, especially since abolition has become the word of the moment. It is an easy way to look virtuous, to forgo sugar. Not to mention it’s immoral,” she added as an afterthought, “to trade in people.”

“I don’t trade in slaves!” Ralph threw his hands up. “God in heaven, I barely trade in sugar anymore! It’s a tiny proportion of my wealth!”

“How tiny?” Frances demanded.

“Less than three per cent!” Ralph blustered, and then suddenly wondered why he had even told her.

Frances nodded, and he felt like he could see her fast brain working. “You should put it in something else.”

“Like what?” Ralph exclaimed. He dropped into his chair, staring at Frances. He couldn’t believe he was having this conversation with an eighteen-year-old girl.

“Perhaps a seaside town,” Frances said simply.

“A seaside town?” Ralph threw his head back and laughed. “Good Lord, I thought I’d heard it all!”

“The Prince Regent is fond of Brighton, is he not?”

“He is,” Ralph conceded. George loved the festive quality of these pleasure resorts and was often pestering Ralph to invest in some of his ventures there.

“Well, let’s see -,” Frances sat down in the chair opposite him and dared to turn the contract around to glance over it. Ralph let her do it, wondering why he didn’t stop her. She tutted and shook her head.

“No, this is not a sound long-term proposition, not if the abolitionist win what they expect to. I imagine most of your investments are in real estate, tobacco, that sort of thing?”

“They are.”

Ralph stared at her in amazement. If he couldn't see her face or hear her voice, he would think he was talking with an experienced financial expert from London. He found himself looking at her intently and wondering: Who are you?

“Well, I hear Hastings is up and coming,” Frances said, twisting the contract back around to him and smiling up at him, infuriatingly cheerful. “Was there anything else, Your Grace?”

Ralph laughed to himself, shaking his head. “You ask me that? Miss Fortescue,” he leaned forward, “I am not sure where you got the impression that I was looking for business advice, but I most certainly was not.”

“Very well,” she stood up, her smile unchanging. “It is good advice though. I am not unfamiliar with these types of contracts. I have been taught economics by my father; I manage all of his business dealings.”

“I thought your father was not succeeding in business at present?” Ralph snapped.

He immediately regretted it. He hadn't realised how much he was put at ease by Frances' easy-going, seemingly impervious exterior. He noticed a slight stiffening of her shoulders, a hard glint in her eye. He had hurt her feelings, and she was trying to hide it. *Good God, man!* He chided himself. *She's half your age!*

“Not due to a bad decision, but a betrayal,” Frances said tartly. “What you are proposing here is a bad decision. What's more, I think you agree, otherwise, you would have kept your father's sugar fortune rather than switching your investments to other less volatile markets.”

“How did you know -?”

“I'm an upcoming lady of society.” Frances shrugged. “It's my business to know everyone's financial status.”

Ralph couldn't help but chortle at the astonishment he felt. It broke the tension.

"Miss Fortescue, you cannot help but state your opinion on all things, can you?" He raised his eyebrow at her.

She grinned. "I confess, I cannot. When I see a friend making a mistake, I must intervene."

A friend. His heart jumped hopefully at the word and her smile made his body flush with need, but he instantly chided himself. What he felt for her was too laced with the desire for her to be friendship alone. Her cheeky, playful manner was too much for him.

If he let his guard down with a sweet girl like her, he knew that nothing good would come of it. Men like him were a plague on pristine, honourable women like her. His age and maturity was all a façade for the outside world, but only he knew the true darkness inside. Only he knew everything he had done. He felt his own amusement dying away. She is not for you, the dark voice inside him sneered, and he listened. He looked away from her beautiful face and returned his pen to the contract.

"Well, perhaps you might forgive us all for not conceding so readily."

He knew his voice was coming across suddenly cold and brutal, but he couldn't help it. It was surely better this way, for both of them. He knew she could surely not benefit from any friendship with him, and what he desired from her was not friendship at all but something much baser. They were alone now, and the study was far away from other rooms in the house. How would she react if he simply reached across the desk and stroked her cheek? What would she do if he kissed her? He bit the inside of his lip, painfully. He needed to keep control of himself. She was simply a stranger, an acquaintance of his sister's who happened to be living in his house. There was no reason she should be anything more.

"I shall leave you to your work." He heard her walk to the door open it. "But I shall not forgive you if you sign that contract."

"Why not?" He looked up, trying to ignore the tightening in his throat when he looked at her. She smiled softly.

“Because I know you are a better man than that.” She nodded to the contract. “Only a fool would put his pride above the future good of his investments and those who benefit from them. You are not a fool.”

She let the door close on her words, giving him a lingering, glowing smile as she did. Ralph let her compliment sit with him for a moment, letting the waves of desire and excitement recede from his body. She didn't think he was a fool. It was a damn marvel, he thought when considered what a blustering, callous fool he appeared to be around her. Still, it was not as if he had to listen to her. She was, after all, no one to him. He stared down at the contract, his pen hovering over the signature spot.

“Damn,” he said softly, lowering his quill. Frances may be infuriating and audacious, alongside being sweet and generous, but that didn't mean she was wrong about this. He stood and crossed the room and fed the contract into the fire.

Chapter Seven

“*H*ow is the campaign going?” Catherine asked Frances, significantly flicking her eyes over to the Duke.

The two women were standing by the windows of the evening parlour at Sinclair Manor, part of the bustling crowd of high society who had arrived for a “gathering” to aide of one of Arabella’s charities.

“It is slow,” Frances whispered, looking at the Duke. He seemed like he was thoroughly bored by the whole experience. “He is reticent and withdrawn with everyone, not just me, but I have managed to draw him out a little.”

“Oh? How so?” Catherine’s black eyes glimmered with interest and she flicked her fan open, hiding their faces from the crowd.

“Well, we often have ... disagreements?”

“That doesn’t sound promising.” Catherine frowned. “You know you mustn’t speak your mind too much with older men, they tend to prefer quieter, demur wives. I hear his first wife was very like that.”

“He doesn’t seem to mind.” Frances looked over at the Duke, noticing the tight set of his jaw and the furrow between his eyebrows. “It’s the only time I’ve seen him smile, apart from when he is with his daughter.”

“Oh, well that is tremendous news!” Catherine gasped. “I had heard that Duke Wynter’s smiles were very handsome back in the day, but I confess, I have never seen one.”

“They are truly beautiful,” Frances admitted, thinking of the way his face split with joy and his eyes filled with excitement.

“As are you,” Catherine nudged her, playfully. “This gown is radiant on you.”

“Thank you.”

Frances smoothed the front of her dress. It was a soft, pearly blue, reminiscent of the inside of an oyster shell. It was made of heavy, flattering satin with small, puffed sleeves and a severe, unusually square neckline that presented a creamy cut of her breasts and neck to the world. Frances had been so taken with the simple, stunning design that she had denied the dressmakers desire to over-trim it with fussy ribbons and lace and asked for a simple strip of cream and blue patterned ribbon under the bust.

“Arabella remarked that it was homely,” Frances said. Catherine rolled her eyes. “Why didn’t you mention that she could be so ...?”

“Sharp-tongued?” Catherine laughed. “Yes, she can be a viper at times. However, she sits at the pinnacle of society, it is hardly surprising, and remember it is only the ladies she sees as dunces that she is genuinely kind to.”

“I should be flattered?” Frances said doubtfully.

She hadn’t felt flattered a few hours ago, when after hours of painstaking preparation, she had come down the stairs and Arabella had turned around, taken one look, laughed daintily and said, “Oh, my dear! What a homely little picture you make!”

She didn’t want to look homely. She wanted to look like the kind of woman who might turn the head of a Duke. She had entered the party feeling quite despondent.

“Yes, you should.” Catherine patted her back, smiling. “I am sure she only feels threatened by you.”

“Threatened?”

Frances stared at Arabella. She was dressed impeccably in the style of gowns that were so fashionable with women of the city. It was heavily adorned with encrusted jewels, lace and a heavy arrangement of diamonds at her throat. A tiara with a feather pinned into her silky golden locks, sat upon her head. Even though she was an older woman

(Matilda had told Frances that her Aunt was nearly forty) she did not look a day over thirty. Frances could not see how such an accomplished, popular lady might be threatened by the likes of herself.

“Of course,” Catherine nudged her gently. “My dear Frances, your naiveté astonishes me sometimes. Look around tonight, no one is dressed as perfectly as you. That neckline with your pearls ...,” Catherine shook her head. “Honestly, Frances. I’ve seen nearly every gentleman in the room look at you.”

“Except for the Duke,” Frances sighed.

“That’s significant,” Catherine whispered, grinning. “To me, it seems like he is determined not to look at you.”

“I have been quite trying to him of late,” Frances mused. Perhaps she had gone too far in presenting her argumentative style. Perhaps Catherine was right, and the Duke did prefer meeker, softer ladies who didn’t approach him with an equal mind. Perhaps that’s what attracted him to his late wife. Frances felt an uncomfortable flicker at the thought of the Duke’s wife. She turned her thoughts away from her and focused on Catherine instead.

“Perhaps I have irritated him too much.”

“Au Contraire, my dear.” Catherine leaned closer. “A man who never looks at a woman is very aware of her, I should guess.”

“But you are only guessing,” Frances whispered back.

“Well, let us put it to the test.” Catherine raised wiggled her black eyebrows suggestively. “Come, let us join the Duke and his sister.”

“Oh no, please, Philip is with them and he barely tolerates me.” Frances tugged Catherine’s hand, resistant. “I don’t want to appear needful.”

“You are their guest; you are living in their home.” Catherine tugged harder. “It is hardly needful to introduce your friend again.”

Frances reluctantly complied. Arm in arm, the two young ladies

crossed the drawing room to join Arabella, Philip and the Duke and one of Arabella's friends by the fire. Frances found herself absurdly nervous. She never felt anxious when approaching the Duke during their daily life at Sinclair Manor. She felt perfectly comfortable in his presence, even when he was being sullen or stern. But tonight, surrounded by strangers, she was reminded again of his impressive stature in society. She took a deep breath and fixed a pleasant smile on her face, trying not to show her anxiety.

"Good evening Lady Adley, Your Grace, Lord Adley." She addressed them all formally, as was appropriate in a public gathering, then gestured to Catherine. "How are you finding this evening?"

"Just capital," Philip said, giving a sidelong look that she noticed took a sweep of the neckline of her dress. "Though it might be more so if my uncle designed to let me display my latest acquisition, my Vermeer."

Frances saw Arabella roll her eyes as if her son's habit of undermining her brother was nothing but tiresome and noticed the way the Duke sipped at his wine, his eyes flashing with the annoyance Frances knew all too well. She jumped into the conversation, trying to divert attention away from the subject of the dreaded painting.

"Your Grace, have you met Lady Catherine?" She asked, managing to draw his eyes to meet hers. She smiled brightly at him and he bowed low to Catherine.

"I am charmed to make your acquaintance," he said.

"Well met, indeed, ," Catherine said, rising from her own curtsy and her mischievous eyes. "Any friend of Frances' is a friend of mine."

Frances blushed at her use of the word 'friend.' Catherine had used it deliberately to try and gage the Duke's reaction, even though she must have known that it was highly presumptuous of Frances to claim friendship with the Duke of Sinclair. She noticed how Philip made a quizzical expression and Arabella's wrinkle-free forehead frowned, but she wanted to see how the Duke reacted. She noticed a tell-tale twitch at the corner of his handsome mouth. He was not angry.

"Oh yes!" Arabella laughed, breaking the awkward silence. "Frances is a firm family friend. Matilda is quite taken with her, but of course,

they are both so young, they have so much in common.” Arabella reached over and squeezed Frances’ arm condescendingly.

Frances tried not to flinch at this blatant infantilising of her character and stepped in before the Duke could respond.

“I am proud to be a mentor for Matilda,” she smiled broadly. “It is a tremendous honour, and yes, we have much to talk of. She is very accomplished for her age, and wise beyond her years.” Frances slid her gaze to Catherine, winking slightly. “I know for certain she is not a lady to be under-estimated.”

“You would know something about that, dear Frances,” Catherine said, clearly happy to jump in and support her friend. She turned to Arabella. “You may not be aware, but Miss Fortescue is not only educated in all ladylike refinements, but she is extremely well versed in matters of economics.”

“Oh, I am aware,” the Duke murmured.

Frances looked up to see a dry wit twinkling in his eye. She smiled.

“My father taught me, in order to train me up in estate management. I did not have my mother, after all, and every grand house needs a lady run its daily life,” Frances said, glancing at the Duke, who nodded.

“Perhaps that could be a way you could support the young Lady Wynter?” Catherine suggested, her eyes darting between Frances and the Duke. “As you said, young ladies of consequence need to learn how to run a large house. Who better to guide her than Frances?”

“Perhaps her aunt!” Arabella’s voice was sharp. She smiled at Catherine, but Frances noticed that it did not reach her eyes. Frances decided to intervene.

“Of course, no one could guide the Lady Wynter better than you. I only want to be of service,” Frances consoled. Then Arabella turned her flinty gaze toward her, and Frances knew her words had not done enough to placate her.

“Oh, sweet Frances,” Arabella’s voice was like syrup. “It is so becoming of a young lady of your station to humble herself in this way; dear little Matilda shall benefit from your ... uh, service, all of

her life, I am sure.”

Frances heard Catherine’s intake of breath beside her. The implied insult, that Frances was only fit to be Matilda’s servant, seemed to ricochet around their little company. Philip was smirking into his brandy, trying not to laugh. Catherine stood stock still beside her, and Arabella smiled at her as if she had just paid her a great compliment. Frances refused to look at the Duke, though she could feel his dark eyes upon her. She breathed out through her nose and smiled, gently, imagining what she might write in her diary as she deflected Arabella’s insults with gentility.

“Of course, you are right,” she smiled. *You sly thing, who are you say such things about me?*

“I will always be a friend to Matilda,” she continued. *If I ever get him to marry me, I will make sure you leave this house the moment we are engaged! Matilda and I will be very happy, watching you squirm with jealousy over our parties and balls - “I cannot wait to see the admirable, intelligent young lady of society she becomes.” - And I shall be a Duchess and you shall still only be Lady Adley!*

Arabella let out one of her tinkling laughs, her eyes shining with cunning, and Frances knew then that there was nothing on earth that would faze or deter Arabella Adley. She always had to have the last word.

“Well, my dear girl, your commitment is truly admirable,” she smiled. “I am afraid I must test your commitment to your duties at present. Would you mind, my dear, running up to my rooms and fetching my notes for my speech? It would be most helpful.”

It was at this moment that Frances realised that sometimes she actively disliked Arabella. Most of the time her haughtiness and condescension could be endured and forgiven, after all, she was only a product of an elite family and some degree of pridefulness was always expected, but tonight Frances felt that Arabella had crossed a line. Her words were a carefully designed dismissal.

She was the mistress of this gathering and she clearly no longer wanted to be entertained by Frances and had worked out a way to remove her from the situation, whilst also reminding her of the hierarchies at play. Arabella was in charge. Frances was at the manor

as her guest and should not presume to rise above her station - with thoughts of friendship with the Duke, or equality with his daughter.

Catherine looked at her sympathetically but there was nothing she could do. Frances was the young unmarried companion, and only there at Arabella's pleasure. She wouldn't have even been invited to this elite event if she was not currently housed with them. The implications of all of this were clear - Frances was not good enough for this family in Arabella's eyes. Frances nodded graciously, trying to ignore the humiliating flush creeping up her neck.

"Of course, Lady Adley," she said, curtsying to the company. "Do excuse me."

She turned, ready to leave the parlour, relieved to no longer look at their faces, but couldn't. The Duke's broad chest and the clean starched shirt was directly in front of her, blocking her path.

"I must speak to Holton about something. Forgive me also."

He was not even looking at her as she stepped past him. He was putting his wine glass down with a nearby server and speaking to his sister, "I won't be but a moment," he said, and then he followed her out of the room.

Frances didn't look over her shoulder, but she could see from the way that the other guest's eyes ignored her and fixed on a presence several paces behind her that the Duke was not far behind. Frances walked on and was relieved to step into the cooler air of the corridor, down through another door and out into the main hallway, dark now except for the candelabra left by the stairs. She was relieved to be where no one was staring at her. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"Miss Fortescue?" The Duke stood beside her, he looked at her with a worried expression.

"Your Grace." She tried to smile. "I am just catching my breath."

He nodded, as if he could see the truth of the situation behind her flushed cheeks and offered her his arm. "Let us walk together."

"Do you not require Holton?"

“We go the same way.” He jerked his head slightly. “Come.”

Frances glanced around hesitantly, but the drawing room door was closed, and no one could see them in this private part of the house. They took the stairs slowly and the Duke said nothing, just allowing her gloved hand to rest on his forearm in stiff formality as he guided Frances along the upstairs landing to his sister’s suite.

Frances tried to think of something to say, anything to say, but she found the silence quite peaceful after the verbal toe-to-toe she had just endured in the room below. Something about the Duke’s presence was infinitely familiar to her. She did not feel like she needed to fill the silence between them. When they reached the door of Arabella’s study, he opened it for her, standing back to allow her to enter.

“Do you know where the speech is?” he asked, taking in the mess of papers and documents on his sister’s desk.

“Not really,” Frances confessed.

“She did imply you would know.” The Duke frowned.

Frances flushed deeper, not wanting to admit that Arabella had clearly sought to put her in her place. If the Duke had not recognised it, she had no desire to alert him to her humiliation.

“Oh,” she laughed to distract him. “It must be here somewhere.”

She crossed to the other side of the desk and began to rifle, trying to ignore the fact that somehow, once again, she was alone in the presence of the Duke. He was looking particularly handsome tonight, dressed in a dark navy dress coat, his waistcoat embroidered with gold thread. It all set off his dark hair and golden-brown eyes perfectly.

She realised she had never looked at him this long before, uninterrupted, of course. It would be deeply inappropriate for her to look at him in company for any length of time, but now they were alone. Completely alone. The strangeness of it, and the illicit excitement of it travelled through Francis like a live current. She felt oddly bolder in this unexpected privacy, especially when she noticed that it seemed to be making him nervous. He was unusually twisting his signet ring on his finger. He was clearly thinking about something with intensity.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, it is only a little strange.” He smiled cautiously. “For us to be up here like this, when everyone else is downstairs.”

“Ah, yes. I suppose.” Frances hesitated. “But we have been alone together before, Your Grace.”

“Yes, but Holton is often ... and you are not ...,” his words trailed off and his eyes rested on her gown. Francis smiled nervously. She knew what he meant. Usually, other people were often very close by. Usually, she was not dressed so finely, and neither was he. Events like this were times of courtship and whispered conversations. They had never been alone after hours before.

“I wonder if you might join me for a ride tomorrow morning,” he said suddenly.

He looked surprised at his own words. Frances bit back the urge to giggle. She did like it when he looked surprised, somehow it made him even more handsome to her.

“I would be delighted.” She bowed her head, gently. “Will Matilda be joining us?”

“I would like to show you a part of the estate that might be a little treacherous for the pony.” The Duke frowned. “I assume you are comfortable with a more challenging ride?”

“You know me.” Frances smiled. “I relish a challenge.”

“You do, indeed!” He laughed.

She enjoyed his laugh; a short, sharp bark of a sound that was hard-won. She felt very proud whenever she caused it. Silence lapsed between them, and it felt like the Duke was not quite eager for their meeting to be over, yet they both knew that if they stayed together much longer, someone would surely notice. It wouldn't do, Frances thought, it would be damaging to both of their reputations, but Frances found herself gazing into his chestnut brown eyes, noticing the flecks of gold and orange in them, unmoving. Then he looked away, coughing slightly.

“I should return to the party. I shall leave you now,” he said, walking towards the door. He turned on the landing, looking back in with hopeful eyes. “But I shall see you tomorrow. We will ride in the morning before breakfast if that is suitable?”

“Eminently.” Frances smiled.

Things had not gone as she had planned that night, but it hadn’t been entirely wasted. Tomorrow she would ride with the Duke, alone. Like his laughter, this opportunity had been hard-won. She intended to make the most of it.

Chapter Eight

“Good morning, my Lord.”

Ralph’s stomach flip-flopped happily when he saw Frances striding across the yard. She was wearing a navy-blue riding coat that swept to the floor, decorated in the military-style with a neat row of gold epaulettes and service stripes along the breast with gold buttons, leading to a high collar. She wore a white stock and shirt, in the men’s style, and a navy-blue tall hat with a feather. He wasn’t sure what had possessed him to invite her for a ride, but he was glad he had done. After Arabella’s public dressing down last night, he wanted her to know that she had at least one ally in the house.

“Good morning, Miss Fortescue.” He nodded for the groom. “This is the mare you will be riding. Her name is Felicia.”

“She is lovely.” Frances moved forward to stroke her grey mane with her leather-gloved hand.

“She has a good temperament and has been specially trained to bear a side saddle. Let me -,”

Ralph waved the groom away, instead offering his own cupped hands for Frances foot. He couldn’t help but notice the white lace trim at the bottom of her petticoat as he hoisted her easily into the saddle. He then checked her stirrups, just as he would for Matilda, and brushed his hand against the cool leather of her boot.

At that moment Frances was re-arranging her jacket and skirts over her boots and their hands met. It was like a static charge, and they both pulled quickly back as if surprised by the effect. Ralph noticed a flush climbing in her cheeks and smiled inwardly. He didn’t expect that a little touch from him would make such a bold young lady coy,

but he was pleased it had. Wordlessly he mounted Cobalt and spurred him forward towards the lake with the groom and Frances following behind. Once their horses had fallen into a gentle walk beside one another, he turned to speak to her:

“How would you feel about a canter down to the lake and then a gallop over the backfield?” He pointed the way with his riding crop. “There is a small ford there but easy enough to jump, if you are willing?”

“I am willing.” Her eyes were sparkling with excitement. She stroked the neck of Felicia. “Is she a fast horse?”

“The fastest mare we have,” he smiled. “Though she cannot beat Cobalt.”

“We’ll see about that, Your Grace.”

Frances spurred Felicia and she reared before breaking into a quick canter down the slope. Ralph chuckled at her gumption and clicked Cobalt to catch up. It felt wonderful to be riding so freely, getting further and further away from the house with only the green grass and the fading morning mist in front of him. Frances led the way over the ford, jumping it easily with the grace of a practised horsewoman, but Cobalt easily overtook them on the gallop over the top field, leaving Frances and the groom in his magnificent wake.

Frances cried out in frustration as Ralph passed her, making him laugh aloud, looking back over his shoulder to see her smiling face and her red curls streaming behind her. When he reached the peak of the hill, he reined Cobalt in and brought him to a slow trot, waiting for Frances to join him. She smiled, pulling on Felicia’s reigns.

“Give me time,” she said. “Next time we race, I’ll beat you.”

Ralph laughed at her competitiveness.

“Would you make a wager on it, Miss Fortescue?”

“I would!” He noticed her frown, looking away towards the lake.

“Does something worry you, Miss Fortescue?”

“Not exactly.” She looked at him, her amber eyes shining in her face. “I have asked you to call me Frances. Why will you not do so?”

Ralph knew why. If he called her by her first name, then they would cease being mere acquaintances. It was what he longed for, but also what he feared most.

“It is not proper,” he said lamely.

Frances shook her head. “But are we not friends now?”

Friends. That word again. His mind rebelled against it, every dark thought that kept him awake at night, every sordid fantasy and impure desire he had for her telling he must not, should not allow a friendship with this lady, but his heart swelled to hear it. Was it not what he had planned, in inviting her on this ride? To assure her of his alliance? What was an ally if not a friend?

“Perhaps,” he conceded. “You are certainly a friend to my child, and a friend to my family.”

“I believe in calling a thing what it is, Your Grace,” Frances laughed. “A friend of my family, is a friend to me.”

“Very well,” Ralph nodded. “You are my friend ... Frances.”

It was worth it for the dazzling smile that she gave him. It lit up her entire face and took his breath away. He looked away from her, aware of the red flush of desire that must be showing around his collar.

“Let us walk the horses along the ridge.” He nudged Cobalt forward and Frances followed him, walking Felicia alongside.

“What should I call you, then?” she asked abruptly. “Shall I call you by your first name also?”

“No,” Ralph shook his head, and without thinking said, “Arabella would not like that.”

Frances laughed, but did not tease him. “Well, we must keep the Lady Arabella happy, that much I know for sure.”

“Indeed!” Ralph agreed readily.

“I shall just call you, ‘Your Grace’ then,” Frances smiled at him reassuringly. “As is proper.”

Ralph nodded in agreement and fell into silence, letting the gentle sound of the horses’ movement, their huffing and heavy footfalls, fill the air between them. He felt unsatisfied. He knew that it would rile Arabella beyond measure to hear that he had offered the privacy of his first name to some unknown lady, but he felt inclined to reciprocate the friendship that she had shown him. He thought seriously for a moment.

“The Prince Regent calls me ‘Wynter.’ He has done since my younger days when my father was Duke of Sinclair. So do most of the household, I think, when I’m not around.” He looked over to Frances hesitantly. “You might call me that... in private.”

“Is that so?” Frances raised her eyebrow cheekily. “I suppose I might. Wynter.”

Ralph laughed, enjoying how pleased with herself she looked. They rode on in companionable quiet, following the groom and his horse, watching the sun fighting through the grey morning mist and falling on the golden bricks of Sinclair Manor, making it glow like a beacon in the valley. Frances checked Felicia to a slower pace, lingering on the ridge.

“It is so beautiful,” Frances sighed, her eyes glued on the grand house.

“It is,” Ralph said. “The prospect is very fair.”

“You are very blessed, Wynter.”

Ralph felt warmth at her use of his familiar name, but also a rush of unease at her comment.

“Hmm,” he said. Frances looked up at him sharply.

“You do not agree?”

“I agree with you,” Ralph sighed, “but I do not feel the impact of your

statement.”

“Oh.” Frances pressed her heels into Felicia’s flank, edging the horse further along the ridge. Ralph followed. “Then I am sorry for you. It is pitiable to have so much, and yet gain no pleasure from it.”

“I am not to be pitied,” Ralph snapped. “My displeasure is all my own making. No pity is needed.”

“A man who makes his own displeasure. What good society he must be!” Frances said in a wry tone. Ralph could tell from her friendly glint in her eyes that she did not mean it.

“What I mean is that if I am dissatisfied then it is entirely due to my own lack of peace, not any defect in society, or even the stones of the manor.”

“You are suffering from a deficiency of peace?” Frances sounded confused. “I cannot say I understand.”

“I do not expect you to,” Ralph said gently. “You are so young. It is an affliction of age.”

“Is it?” Frances looked at him with piercing eyes. “Or is it an affliction of the heart?”

Ralph felt his own heart clench at her words. He swallowed hard. “What do you mean by that?”

“I admit to my own youth and the deficiencies that brings, but I have seen those who are deficient in peace even younger than myself.”

She spoke slowly, as if she were speaking her thoughts as they came to her. Ralph felt wondrous freedom in this, that he was hearing the words of Frances’ mind, unprepared and unadulterated. He felt oddly honoured and listened carefully as she continued.

“In my limited experience, when one cannot be consoled by the happiness of their situation or surroundings, it is from a lack of contentment in their inner being.”

She looked up into his face, her eyes free of guile. “What do you

think?”

It was such an honest question that he knew he could not deflect it with a glib remark or an untrue statement. She had shared her own musings with him, the clear thoughts of her own making. He could at least share his own with honesty.

“I am not certain.” He looked up at the trees of the ridge, blowing in the breeze and sighed. “I think... I think it may be possible for a human spirit to be born discontented, and to carry that discontentment with them through their life’s journey.”

“You believe that you have always been dissatisfied?” She gestured over the fresh, green landscape. “Can you not remember a time when you were contented here?”

Ralph thought through his life, letting his memories wash over him, but they were too powerful, and he shook his head. The pain of his marriage, the memories of his wife’s face, filled him up so he gripped Cobalt’s reins tight, making the great horse snort and toss his head. Frances noticed.

“I am sorry,” she murmured, reaching over to pat Cobalt’s neck and calm him. “You are troubled to consider it. I apologise for my insensitivity.”

“No, no, it is not you.” Ralph breathed out, staring back at the manor. “It is only that since the death of Matilda’s mother, this place has brought only sad memories to me.”

He didn’t realise how Sinclair Manor had become oppressive to him until he was riding away from it. Looking back at it he felt no joy, only a sense that the place was nothing more than a great mausoleum of memories and bitterness that he was entombed in. He didn’t believe in ghosts, but sometimes it did feel as if his wife’s own distress and tearful rebukes had soaked into every room and stone and lingered there, filling the space with the sense of her neglected presence. Out here, in the open-air with Frances, he recalled the sweet rush of being fully alive. The prospect of returning once more to that vale of memory was much reviled.

“I understand,” Frances nodded. “After my mother died our home was melancholy for me, too.”

Ralph had forgotten for a moment that Frances had been raised mostly by her father. She was so competent a young woman, so sensitive and elegant, that it was strange to consider she had no mother looking over her shoulder to guide her and instruct her in it.

“When did you lose your mother, Frances?” he asked softly.

“I was around the same age Matilda was.”

Frances wound one of her gloved hands into the mane of her horse. He could tell it was to comfort her and his heart went out to her.

“It was very sudden, and I could not understand at first where she could have gone. It was hard to understand that she would never be coming back.”

“How did you ...,” he struggled to find the words. “How did you manage to become who you are, Frances? So elegant and refined and - and able in society? I will be honest with you,” he shook his head dolefully, “I have not the first idea how I can guide my daughter to be a lady of society.”

Frances looked at him, her face filled with a softness that surprised him.

“What is it?” he asked uncertainly.

She shook her head, smiling gently. “I just don’t think I have ever met a father as devoted to his daughter’s success as yourself.”

Ralph flushed at her compliment. He was glad of the fresh morning breeze on his face.

“How did you do it?” he asked simply.

“Well, I was blessed in my nurse who had known my mother for a long time. Matilda is lucky in that also.” She smiled at him supportively. “I was also blessed in my father, who kept my mind occupied with art and other activities. He always encouraged me to pursue my interests and passions, whatever they were. For a while, I was utterly bewitched by archery,” she laughed at the memory. “My poor father knew it was quite unladylike, but still created an archery

course on the croquet lawn!"

"He sounds like a very engaging man," Ralph laughed, "and a good father to you."

"He was! He still is." Frances brushed her auburn curls over her shoulder. "He couldn't be everything to me all the time. It was important for me to socialise with young ladies from an early age, especially older ladies in society. There are some things after all that a young lady cannot share with her father."

"Such as?" Ralph did not like the idea of Matilda keeping secrets from him.

"Well, things to do with gentlemen, of course." Frances smiled shyly. "Those things are best shared with an older lady. Matilda will be lucky to have Arabella to guide her in matters of the heart."

Ralph frowned slightly. He had not always appreciated the way Arabella had interacted with gentlemen, even when she was married. She seemed to think about them only in terms of what she could get from them, either favours or leverage. He did not really like the idea of Matilda inheriting her ways.

"Last night, you said that Matilda would always have you as a friend," he asked. "Were you in earnest?"

"Of course," Frances smiled eagerly. "She is wonderful company."

"I am glad you think so." Ralph stared back towards the manor. "I only want the best for Matilda. She is my priority now. I think she will benefit greatly from your friendship and guidance."

"Even in horse jumping?" Frances teased.

"In anything," Ralph replied, smiling at her. "I trust you will always be a good friend to her. I trust you."

Frances flushed bright red at his words, he was astonished. She was such an unflappable lady in every way. She had not been embarrassed by his sharp words or by Arabella's acidic tongue, but this one, simple affirmation, seemed to have left her completely speechless. It was

endearing.

“Thank you,” she finally said, quite primly. “Shall we return to the stables?”

“Of course,” he said.

He made a clicking sound with his teeth, signalling to both Cobalt and the groom that it was time to return. Together, they followed the path of the groom’s horse through the long grass and past the lake, and home to the stable door.

From afar, Ralph saw Matilda lingering by the stable.

“Papa, you’re back!” Matilda called, tugging on her maid’s hand. “Did you have a nice ride? Did you jump the ford? Did you have a race? Did Franny win?”

“Hush, child!” Ralph laughed, quickly dismounting but Matilda was distracted, staring up at her friend in frank admiration.

“You look beautiful, Franny! You don’t wear that coat when we go riding!”

Ralph saw Frances flush again, though this time she laughed it off.

“That is because you’re not a duke, my little lady!” She laughed, smiling down at Matilda. “Let me dismount and change out of my riding clothes, and then we will do some painting.”

Ralph was touched to think that Frances had dressed so beautifully on his account, her embarrassment was adorable. He patted his daughter’s head and then crossed over to Frances’ horse, offering his hands to her.

“May I?”

She looked surprised, perhaps even a little flustered, but nodded. Ralph reached up and placed his hands carefully around her waist, marvelling at how small it was, and carefully lifted her down onto the ground. He was aware of the pressure of her hands on his shoulders, the way she drew in her breath and, as she landed, how she stumbled

slightly against him and reflexively put up her gloved hands to rest on his chest, causing a burst of feeling inside. He instinctively caught her hand, without meaning to wrapping his fingers around hers, to steady her.

“Are you alright?” he asked softly.

For a moment they were standing so close that Ralph could see how the perfect ringlet of hair which lay against her cheek, was a sumptuous blend of red, gold, brown and blonde. The skin on her cheek was as pale and silky as fresh cream. Then she stepped back, smoothing her gown and averting his gaze.

“Quite well. Thank you, Wynter,” she said quietly.

He wanted her to look up at him. In fact, he wanted to reach and tip her little chin up towards him so he could look into her amber eyes. She brushed past him and he watched her go, smiling as she lifted her blue skirt to run the last few paces and catch up with Matilda. She held Matilda’s other hand, and he heard her happy laughter floating back to him across the stable yard. He thought of the question Frances had asked him during their ride:

Can you not remember a time you were contented here?

Today, he realised suddenly. *Today, here, with you.*

Chapter Nine

*R*estless, she had woken in the hour before dawn when the sky was grey with the coming light and pulled on boots and her long riding coat to cover her nightdress and slipped out for a walk around the lake. She had not expected to see anyone so early, hoping to be alone with her thoughts, but then she had heard a loud splash close by. She squinted against the mists of the morning and, with a lurch of her heart, saw a familiar small pony galloping away from the lake. She was running before she knew it, her eyes scanning the water, looking for ripples. Then, bursting through the weed and lilies, was the damp, struggling head of a child.

“Matilda!” Frances screamed, striding into the lake, throwing off her riding jacket as she did. Matilda had disappeared beneath the water again.

“Help!” Frances screamed as the water passed up beyond her waist. “Help me! Help!”

Her screams cut through the misty air, she thought she saw movement on the other side of the lake, but she knew she could not wait. She took a deep breath and plunged under the murky water, swimming fast, blinding seeking Matilda under in the reeds and weeds and finally grabbing her soaking riding cloak. Frances swam upwards, her head breaking the surface of the water in blessed relief, Matilda heavy in all her riding clothes under her arm and coughing up pond water. Frances was grateful she had only thrown a coat on over her nightdress, so she didn’t have to drag the weight of her own sodden gown along with Matilda’s. Through the mist, she saw someone at the edge of the lake.

“What happened?” Holton’s voice called out.

“Get Wynter!” Frances shouted back, completely forgetting that she was not supposed to use that name for him in public. “Matilda fell in!”

Holton ran back toward the house and Frances fixed her eyes on the other side of the lake, breathlessly heaving herself and Matilda through the muddy waters as Matilda sobbed and coughed. It was slow going and her legs ached by the time her feet could touch the rocky bottom of the lake as she half dragged, half carried Matilda into the shallows. She saw Wynter and Holton running full pelt down towards them, a groom and a horse in tow.

“Matilda!” Wynter shouted, launching himself into the shallows as Frances waded breathlessly toward him. Immediately he seized his little girl from Frances’ arms and set her on the bank, clutching her close.

“What happened?” He stared around at Frances. She realised that he might think she was responsible for this accident.

“I - I don’t know!” Frances spluttered, “I was walking, I couldn’t sleep, and I saw -,”

“It was my fault, Papa!” Matilda sobbed. “I wanted to jump the pony, but I knew you and Frances wouldn’t let me and - and I - I took my pony out but she got spooked -,” Matilda took great whoops of breath, her hair straggly with weeds. “- She threw me into the lake! I thought I was going to drown and then - and then -,”

Matilda couldn’t continue. She buried her face in her father’s coat and howled. Holton took over the narrative.

“I had an early meeting with the groom at the stables when I heard a splash of something going into the lake. Then I heard shouts for help.”

“That was me,” Frances said. “I called out.”

Holton smiled at her affectionately. “I saw you swim out to her. It was a great act of bravery, to plunge into unknown waters. I would not have reached her in time. Thank you.”

Holton bowed low to her as if she were a queen. Wynter was looking up at her with a strained expression, his face white.

“Holton, please take Matilda back up to the house before she gets chilled,” Wynter said, “Take the horse. We will follow.”

“Of course, sir.” Holton removed his jacket and wrapped Matilda up as tenderly as if she was his own child. “Come, little one, let’s go for a ride.”

Holton mounted and allowed Wynter to pass the shivering little girl up into his arms. He looked down at Wynter and Frances.

“Do not linger too long, sir, it is cold this morning and do not worry about the pony. The groom will fetch her back.”

“Thank you, Holton,” Wynter murmured, watching as the groom doggedly set off around the lake, whistling loudly, in search of the wayward pony. As soon as he was gone, Frances turned to the Duke.

“I swear, I had no knowledge of Matilda’s plans to ride alone, it was entirely a coincidence that I happened to be here, I would never have permitted -,”

“Peace, Frances.” Wynter grasped her hands, squeezing her frozen fingers tightly. “You have just risked your own life to save my child’s. I owe you a tremendous debt. You do not owe me an explanation.”

Frances breathed a sigh of relief, her body relaxed, she was suddenly exhausted. She stumbled to the muddy bank, her knees buckling underneath her.

“Frances!” Wynter arms were around her, holding her upright and he stared into her face with a worried expression. “Are you well?”

“I - I’m well - I - just - just -,” She couldn’t stop her teeth from chattering and her whole body vibrated against him, trembling from the top of her damp hair all the way to her toes.

“You’re in shock.” He pulled her tight against him, his warm arms encircling her damp body. “We must get you warm, here let me -,”

Before Frances could say a word, he had swept her up into his arms, crushing her tight against his chest, striding towards the stables at a remarkable pace. In her cold, frozen state Frances still had a moment

to admire how fit and agile he was for an older man.

“Boy, is the fire lit in the stable master’s house?” he called to a passing groom.

“Yes, sir!” the boy called. “Mr Holton sent word to have it lit and has sent down some hot tea - he thought you might have need of a space to warm up before you return to the house!”

“Thank you.”

The stable boy looked at Frances curiously as she passed by in his master’s arms, the very picture of a damsel in distress with her long hair hanging loose, her white nightgown sodden and clinging to her legs. He ran ahead, opening the doors for his Master and watching, goggle-eyed as his Master brought the lady in, spoke quickly to the stable master who ran to find some woollen socks and a blanket, and settled her on a stool near the grate. The boy wondered if this was what a mermaid looked like, for he’d heard tell of beautiful women pulled from the water, but before he could ponder this more, his Master had dismissed him and he ran across the yard, eager to share what he had seen with the other lads. As for Frances, she barely noticed the boy, preoccupied as she was with Wynter’s strong arms around her and his warm breath on her cheek.

“How do you feel?” Wynter asked, once he had set her on a stool in front of the fire, and Frances had unlaced her boots with shaking fingers to draw on the thick, wool socks the stable master had brought.

“A little b-better, thank you,” Frances said, trying to control her shivering. The wet fabric of her nightdress was chilling her naked flesh underneath.

“I’m not surprised you are so cold.” Wynter looked down at her critically, his dark eyes questioning. “Do you make a habit of walking at dawn in only your nightgown?”

“No, I do not!” She noticed the way his eyes darted to her chest where her nightgown stuck to her breasts. She crossed her arms angrily. “I had my riding coat on, of course, but I threw it off when I went into the water so it would not weigh me down. You should be grateful!” Frances glared at him. “If I had been dressed for the day, there would

have been no way I could have swum so far to r-retrieve h-her!”

The shivering had taken hold of Frances again and she turned toward the fire, embarrassed and irritated. Wynter said nothing. He looked down at her for a moment and then shucked off his jacket, dropping it over her shoulders and knelt in front of her, tucking the blanket over her knees carefully. His hands moved gently as if he was soothing a child, and the shaking began to subside.

“I am grateful,” he said finally, kneeling in front of her with his warm hands pressed heavily on her shoulders. “I am more grateful than I can say, you are so valiant and unthinking of your own safety. You must forgive me.” He shook his head gently. His slightly damp hair fell in dark strands across his forehead. “I confess myself to have been very afraid this morning.”

Frances’ heart went out to him. Of course, he was afraid. He had lost his wife and this morning he had worried he had lost his daughter, too.

“I understand,” she said softly. “You have suffered so much heartbreak already.”

Wynter looked at her sharply and then understanding dawned on his face.

“You refer to my wife,” he said. Frances nodded.

Wynter sighed and sat back on the stones, reaching to the grate where two heavy, ceramic mugs sat before the fire, warm cups of tea ready to be drunk. He offered one up to Frances who took it gratefully, even though the hot pottery scalded her frozen palms. She sipped slowly, waiting for him to speak. It wouldn’t be right to press him for information about his wife.

“I fear you are labouring under a misunderstanding about my relationship with my wife,” Wynter said, taking a slow sip of his tea. “After today, I feel I owe you some of the truth.”

“What is that?” Frances asked.

Wynter ran his hand through his damp wet hair and sighed.

“That I didn’t love my wife.”

He looked up at Frances with honest, brown eyes.

“Lowenna did not have the best of me in her lifetime. In fact, I was a perfectly dreadful husband to her.”

Frances could tell that Wynter needed to speak his mind, as honestly as possible, so she did not deny the validity of anything he said. She simply nodded for him to continue, sighing heavily, he took another sip of tea, and continued to speak:

“We married young, Lowenna and I, both to secure our respective family fortunes. It was a marriage of status, not love, and I shall be truthful with you, I resented it.”

He looked up at her, his face creased with the pain of memories.

“My father died soon after we wed, and I was a young man with far too much wealth and not enough maturity. Unlike you, Frances.”

“Indeed, I am quite the opposite.” Frances smiled drily at him and received a small, thankful smile.

“If I had your wisdom at that age, Frances, I might have behaved differently, but I preferred the races, and the gambling houses, rather than spending time at home with my wife. I did not care for her as I should, even after Matilda was born.”

He sat on the stone slabs of the floor in front of Frances, completely at ease with himself and looking perhaps the least like a Duke she had ever seen him. He wore his tall riding boots, which shone a lustrous nutmeg brown in the firelight, and without his jacket and with his shirt sleeves rolled up, Frances felt like she was seeing a younger, looser side to him. He was incredibly handsome like this, so handsome she was reminded of his reputation as a man who *bought* beautiful company frequently. She couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy for the women that had kissed those lips. It was easy to believe this man had once dismissed his responsibilities and sought only his own pleasure and contentment.

“Marriage can be an adjustment, especially in the beginning, I have heard,” Frances said. “It can take time.”

Wynter nodded, gazing into the fire. "I ran out of time. I didn't deserve her, so I cannot complain that she is gone. Her mother always said she died of a broken heart, and though I know it cannot be true, it haunts me still."

"You believe your actions broke her heart?"

"My ... friendships," Wynter caught her eye meaningful and then quickly looked away. "With other women. Not anyone of standing or anyone of importance you see, but -," Wynter grimaced as if suddenly realising he was talking to a woman. "Forgive me, Frances, I should not speak so with a young lady."

"I understand, Wynter." Frances smiled sardonically. "When a man is known to run around with the Prince Regent, one knows what to expect."

Wynter smiled sheepishly, almost boyishly and Frances couldn't help her urge to laugh. Then his face fell, and he gazed sadly into his mug.

"She was unhappy in life. She never raised her voice to me, never reprimanded me, but she was reserved and depressed, and disappointed - all of her tears were at my hand." He shook his head sadly. "Now Matilda must grow up without a mother, and my every waking moment must be dedicated to securing her future. I didn't realise how hard it would be to do it alone. I didn't know much I needed Lowenna ... until she was gone."

Frances' own heart began to ache. She considered her father, the man who raised her, and whom she so often took for granted. She felt her own resolve growing within her. And leaned forwards, instinctively taking hold of Wynter's hand and squeezing tightly.

"You are not alone," she said fiercely. "Your wife may be gone, and your marriage may have been unhappy, but you did not kill her, Wynter. You have faults, but your responsibility does not include who lives and dies."

Wynter nodded heavily and Frances saw his throat working as he swallowed tightly, unable to speak. They sat there for a moment; hands held in the warmth of the firelight. Then he looked into her face, smiling weakly.

“How did one so young become so wise?” he asked.

Frances laughed. “I have been lucky in my friends and influences, Wynter.”

“Indeed.” He smiled and tugged her hand a little, pulling her closer so their faces were closer. “I have never had a friend like you, Frances. I swear, I will be a good friend to you. My protection, my fealty, my resources; you have them.”

Frances did not quite understand. The look that he gave her, as his golden eyes fixed on her lips. His fingers held hers so tightly, not out of friendship, but intense desire. It was a question that to her, demanded an answer. She needed to know the truth of him, and something about the intimate setting, this moment of raw vulnerability that she may never get again, it pushed her forward.

“Thank you. Your friendship means everything to me.” She hesitated, and then ploughed ahead. “Have you never been in love then, my friend?”

There was silence between them, only the crackling of the fire and the sound of their breathing. She could see his rapid breath where she watched at the base of his throat and felt her own heart thundering madly. *What have you done?* She despaired. That is not the kind of question fine young ladies ask! Then she felt his finger touch under her chin, inviting her to lift her eyes to his. It seemed like he searched her face for answers for a moment, and then let out a slow breath.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. His finger still rested under her chin. His other hand moved slowly, inviting her to entwine her fingers with his. She did so, without thinking, their hands fitting together like the pieces of a puzzle. She was no longer cold, in fact, she felt as if she was on fire as his fingers traced hers.

“Have you, Frances?” His voice was low, and his brows furrowed. “Ever been in love?”

For a moment she felt sure that if she only tipped her head a little closer, their lips would have met in a rush of heat and passion. But she did not. She could not. Something was stopping her, something deeper and more visceral than all the reasons she had for pursuing him. The threat of her father’s words, her bet with her cousin, all of it seemed

very far away from this moment. What was present and real to her then was that Ralph Wynter was someone she liked, desired and cared for more than anyone she had ever known. Somewhere along the way, in the moments of disagreement, and laughter, and conversation, in the touch of his hands around her waist and the gentleness of his presence as he walked beside her, something had changed. She had changed. When she looked into Wynter's face now, she no longer saw his fortune. She saw her future. She swallowed hard.

"Yes," she whispered. "I have."

Chapter Ten

*M*_y dear daughter,

I hope this letter finds you well and you are enjoying your stay with Lady Adley and her brother, but I must entreat you to return home, however. You have now been gone from our house for a month and we must make progress on your marriage arrangements. With assistance from the Prince Regent I have entered a conversation with Lord Hart, who will be an excellent match for you. I understand the Lady Adley is to host a ball. Lord Hart has told me he will be in attendance and will seek you out. After the ball, I think it will be time for you to come home, as it will hardly be proper for you to remain in the house of the Duke as your courtship progresses.

I look forward to seeing your face. I have missed you greatly.

Your loving father,

Baron Andrew Fortescue

Frances looked at the letter in her hand, her mind racing. She didn't know what to think. Then she glanced down at the words she had been writing in her diary just moments before she had opened the missive from her father.

Wynter continues to be the kindest gentlemen of my acquaintance. When I first met him and knew of his reputation, I assumed that I might be able to catch him through my good looks and through gentle flattery, but now I know I was mistaken. He is not what everyone perceives him to be - a debonair ladies' man - but rather deeply sensitive in almost every way. When we talk, he challenges me to be a better person, and I want to attempt it, if only for his sake.

Even the words of her diary could not fully encapsulate the rages of emotion Frances was now feeling towards Ralph Wynter. Since the morning of Matilda's escapade in the lake, he had become even friendlier and kinder, engaging her in conversation frequently, and seeking her out when she was reading or writing alone.

On one occasion, when they had been riding together and he had been discussing at length how to manage a stable and she had happened to infer that the topic was not her area of interest, Wynter had said, "Any young lady must be prepared to completely run a household when she marries. I am determined that you should develop appropriately."

His words had made her flush from her ears to the tip of her nose. It sounded like he was implying that he was interested in training her up to run his household. She had commented, cautiously, "But Wynter, not all grand houses are as finely equipped as yours."

"Well, a friend does not let his friend march into battle unprepared." Wynter had smiled then. "And we are friends, as established."

"Indeed."

Frances had watched as Wynter dismounted, then turned to offer her his hands. She eagerly reached for his broad shoulders, enjoying the feeling of his hands around her waist again, as he lifted her down. She felt the imperceptible squeeze of his fingers and the corresponding tingle inside her, but then he pulled away, and they walked the ridge together, holding their horses' reigns. They had walked in silence for a little while, as Frances considered these small touches and looks, the little compliments and flirtations that he gave her daily. Why was he speaking as if she would be married any minute, and why was he looking at her in that way if he believed she was?

"Why do you try and teach me how to get on as a wife?" she has asked, stopping to look at him directly. "Do you know something I don't?"

He laughed, the golden hue of his eyes catching in the sunlight.

"I know that a young woman like you would be the jewel of any household." He grinned with that slightly rakish charm that she found so completely irresistible, then leaned out to brush a curl from her forehead.

She held her breath as he picked it out a small leaf from her hair, his smile broad and kind. Then the moment was over, and he was turning away, glancing back down towards the house. Frances shook herself and followed.

“But I am not yet to be married, Wynter,” she said. “Perhaps not for many years.” She paused. “Perhaps never.”

“You do not want to marry?” His voice seemed more tense than usual.

“I want to marry a man I love,” she replied, intentionally catching his eye. “It might be many years before I find him.”

“Then you have many years of my inane lessons ahead of you.” He had smiled and then moved the conversation along.

Now, as Frances stared at her father’s letter, she realised it was no longer true. She was much closer to entering matrimony than she thought. Wynter had been right, and she got no joy from it. What would he think when he found out? If she told him that her father had arranged a suitor for her, how would he respond? Lord Hart was a fine gentleman, she had met him several times. He was warm and energetic, wealthy and young, and would be a wonderful husband, she was sure, but she did not love him. How could she when she had lost her heart to Ralph Wynter? She slipped the letter back in the envelope, completely lost for what to do.

“What on earth are you doing? You are supposed to be helping me with the books for my charity ball!”

Arabella stood in the doorway to Frances’ room, her beautiful face etched with a frown. They were two days away from Arabella’s big charity ball and the strain of the event was beginning to show. The usually composed lady of the house was snappy and irritable with everyone, but Frances was bearing the brunt of her disagreeable nature. She sighed inwardly.

“I am sorry. I had a letter from my father.”

“Well, never mind that now.” Arabella waved a hand, irritably. “Come, come, don’t keep me waiting.”

Frances followed Arabella into her study, which was in its usual state

of disarray, and was surprised to see Wynter there already. He stood, frowning over a piece of paper, but smiled quickly as he saw Frances enter.

“Miss Fortescue,” he said. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Your Grace.”

Frances nodded demurely and then when Arabella’s back was turned smiled wickedly at him, enjoying the way his eyes twinkled in response. She took her seat behind Arabella’s desk, opening her books so she could write up the appropriate invoices. She could feel Wynter’s eyes on her and tried to focus.

“What do you need, brother?” Arabella snapped. “As you can see, I am very busy.”

Frances knew it was never a good idea to snap at a man like Ralph Wynter, even if he was your little brother. Without looking up, she could feel his anger brewing.

“What I need, sister, is an explanation,” Wynter said coolly. Frances heard him shake the piece of paper in her direction. “Holton has been going over my accounts. Your budget for this occasion is extraordinary. How can it possibly be so costly?”

“You would prefer me scrimp on an occasion where the crème of society is present?” Arabella’s voice was curt. “Including your dear friend, the Prince Regent?”

“George does not require flowers costing upwards of fifty pounds!” Wynter exclaimed, slapping the piece of paper down on the desk, making Frances jump.

“Excuse me, Miss Fortescue,” he said in a much quieter tone. Frances glanced up to see an apology in his brown eyes. She smiled.

“No, you must excuse me, Your grace.” She rose. “This is a private conversation; I shall wait outside.”

“No, you shall not!” Arabella countered. “You are already late, and those invoices must be paid and sent today! We shall step into my

parlour.”

Arabella caught her brother unceremoniously by the sleeve and pulled him into the other room. Immediately, Frances heard an outburst of, “Brother, you must not talk about money in front of the guests!”

Followed by Wynter’s angry, raised voice saying, “The girl is running your books, Bella, I don’t think she’ll hear anything you didn’t need her to know! You seem to forget who’s money it is who funds your charitable foundations and institutions -,”

“You seem to forget how all of this serves your good reputation after all that happened with your poor wife!”

Frances winced. That would not go down well with Wynter. The tempo and volume of their argument dropped to the low grumbles and high-pitched whispers of tense siblings. Frances sighed, reaching for the paper Wynter had brought in. Holton must have made some miscalculation. Frances had the invoice for the flower costs sitting right in front of her, and it was well under fifty pounds. She frowned as she read Holton’s account. Then, from beneath a sheaf of papers in her own little book in which she had been keeping track of the ball’s budget (a trick she had learnt from her father) she re-read her entries.

She couldn’t believe it, but it seemed Holton’s account was wildly out of sync with the budget she and Arabella were operating for the ball. Everything from the flowers, to the butchers, and the elaborate fireworks display was grossly over-calculated. Why there must be nearly a thousand pounds of difference between her own accounting and Holton’s! How could that be? Something was suspicious, but she wasn’t quite sure what. Then, she heard a soft tap at the door. Holton himself stuck his head around it, smiling to see Frances.

“Good morning, Miss Frances,” he said. “Have you seen Lady Arabella? There is a harpist sitting in the parlour who says she is here for an audition - ah -,”

Holton’s face changed as he registered the sound of his master’s disagreement with his sister in the next room.

“I shall wait, then.”

“I recommend you do,” Frances said, setting her own book and

Holton's record side by side. "Holton, I am just checking the invoices here. Can I ask, do I pass them onto you once I have verified them?"

"Alas, no." Holton sighed. "If you did, I might have better control over Lady Arabella's lavish aesthetic decisions. No, the Lady keeps her own purse and accounts. She will pay the invoices out of her allowance from the Duke."

"I see."

Frances' heart was racing but she did her best to remain calm. She lifted the piece of paper Holton had given Wynter.

"And is this how she accounts for her expenditure of the allowance usually? I only ask," she added hurriedly, seeing Holton's concern, "because I need to ensure she has accounted for everything appropriately. She might be assigning some expenditure to some of the other charity donors."

Holton's expression cleared. "Oh, yes. She sends me a request and then I sit with her and write up the report, as she informs me of expenses. The Duke likes to pay special attention to charity expenditure. It has been higher, this past year, than usual," he mused thoughtfully.

Frances said nothing, nodding slowly. She looked at the two items side by side in front of her. If Holton and Wynter never saw the official invoices and were only told by Arabella where the money was going, then they would never know they were being viciously overcharged. But where was Arabella putting the extra money?

Frances bit her lip, her mind racing, then carefully asked, "Holton, this is a personal invoice of Lady Arabella's. I must enter it into her accounts. Would you know where she keeps her personal books?"

"Of course." Holton crossed to the desk and stood beside Frances, opening a lower drawer and pulling out a marbled blue and white book. "Here."

"Thank you."

Frances pretended to look at it but knew full well that if Holton knew of its location it was unlikely that Arabella kept records of siphoning

off her brother's money in there. However, the drawer might hold the answers.

“Oops!”

She pretended to drop the book and leant down, out of sight, to dip her hand into the lower drawer and rifle around. She saw papers and letters, but no additional book until finally, at the bottom, her fingers fell on a slim, red journal which she extracted slowly, hiding it inside the larger, blue accounts book.

“Got it!”

She held the blue book aloft to Holton who smiled, nodding, but then returned to listening outside of the parlour door to see if he could hear his Master. With him suitably occupied, she turned her attention to the slender red journal. When she compared the contents of one with the other, it all became clear. Arabella's blue book accounted for her spending, if the charity events had been costing what she told Holton and her brother they did, but Arabella's red book told a different story. They showed the expenditure of a much larger allowance, an extra thousand pounds every few months, frittered away on the latest fashions and most expensive tickets. Frances was not a financial genius, only a sensible girl with a head for figures, but she knew what all of this added up to. Arabella was stealing from her brother.

The parlour doors sprang open and Arabella marched out, calling over her shoulder to her brother, “And I shall hear no more of it!” She glanced dismissively at Holton. “What do you want?”

“Your harpist is here, your Ladyship.”

“Very well, take me to her,” Arabella said, then turned her frowning face to Frances. “You carry on. I'll be back soon. God save me, there is so much to be done!”

She swept from the room with Holton in her wake, just as Wynter stepped back in from the parlour, an angry frown on his face.

“Are you well, Wynter?” she asked quietly.

“I'm fine,” he sighed, running his hand through his hair. “I just wish she would exercise a little control over her charitable spending!”

Though it is hard to fault a person who spends money in the name of good deeds.”

“Indeed,” Frances looked down at the books in front of her, twisting her fingers nervously. She knew that Wynter deserved the information she had uncovered, but she didn’t know how to present it.

“Frances?” She looked up. He was looking at her, concerned. “Are you well?”

“I - I -,” Frances stumbled over her words. “What - what if there were some - some inaccuracies in the books that your sister presented?”

“What do you mean?” Wynter frowned.

Hesitantly, Frances turned her findings around so Wynter could see them.

“This is Holton’s account of Lady Arabella’s financial needs, however -,” she pointed to the invoices. “-that is not an accurate representation of the costings.”

Wynter looked them over carefully. “It seems there has been a mistake. I will discuss it with Holton.”

“It’s not Holton’s fault,” Frances said. She carefully placed the two accounting books in front of him. “The blue is your sister’s public accounts, and the red is her private accounts -,”

“You have been through my sister’s private accounts?” Wynter interrupted, staring at her.

“I - I only - I know I did wrong -,” Frances stammered.

“You know that it’s wrong to rifle through other people’s property?” Wynter’s voice was cold. “It’s good to see your moral compass is still functioning.”

Frances stood up, flushing with embarrassment and a little anger. She had only done this for him!

“To be clear, Arabella has given me leave to go through her accounts,”

she said coldly. "I only did what was required, and then I noticed this discrepancy."

She held up Arabella's personal accounting book. "Your sister has been lying about her charity expenditure and then putting the extra funds towards her own personal gain. Here is the proof."

"Enough!" Wynter snatched the book from her hand and slammed it down on the table. "This is my sister we are speaking of!"

"I understand that -,"

"You understand nothing!" Wynter's eyes flashed. "I know she has made life difficult for you, but that is hardly a reason to make such accusations -,"

"Wynter, the truth is right here!" Frances cried.

"The truth is that my sister is a Wynter," his voice started to rise. "She is many things I do not like, but she is not an embezzler."

"Please, just look over the book with Holton," Frances pleaded. "This is your fortune, your daughter's inheritance that is being spent -,"

"Stop speaking." Wynter held up his hands, his eyes closed to the truth. "Please. Before I think worse of you."

"Think worse ... of me?" Frances stared at him, then dropped into the seat behind the desk in amazement. "I thought you said that you trusted me, Wynter."

"I thought you were trustworthy!"

"You thought?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her with an expression Frances couldn't quite read. However, she knew it wasn't the face of the man who had held her so tenderly by the lake, and spoken to her with such honesty beside the stable master's fire. In speaking those words, she had changed things between them, and she didn't know how to change them back. His silence filled the air. He did not apologise.

“Well, if your trust can be lost so easily, I suppose it was never truly given,” Frances said quietly.

She looked down at the table, slipping the accounting books back into the drawer.

“We will speak no more of this,” Wynter said above her.

“Agreed,” Frances said. “We will speak no more.”

She set quill to paper and begin to Arabella’s charity work as she had been instructed to, refusing to look up at him. Wynter said nothing. She heard the slam of the door closing behind him. Frances dashed a tear away with the tip of her finger but still didn’t look up. She kept on writing.

Chapter Eleven

“*H*ow are you this evening, Miss Fortescue?” Holton asked as Frances entered the ballroom.

“I am well, thank you, Holton,” Frances said. “How lovely the ballroom looks!”

“Yes,” Holton agreed, looking around. “Lady Arabella can certainly put on a show, when it is required.”

He wasn’t wrong. The ballroom at the Sinclair Manor was the finest Frances had ever been in. Even though she knew that Arabella had fiddled the books, she couldn’t help but admire her taste in the grand floral arrangements, the perfect way that the food was arranged on tables, with golden pineapples and vast gilded vats of white soup. Frances dressed in her favourite ball gown, a gorgeous green silk gown that set off her red hair perfectly, and she had even worn her favourite amber stone necklace that she knew matched her eyes. She had woven green ribbon into her hair and even worn her mother’s pearl earrings. She knew that she looked as beautiful as she ever had and had hoped that she might have a moment to talk to Wynter, perhaps to set things right.

“Where is the Duke?” she asked Holton, unable to find Wynter’s face in the sea of fine dresses and black coats.

“He is over there, in the company of the Prince Regent,” Holton nodded toward a corner.

Frances’ stomach dropped. Ralph and the Prince Regent were not alone. They were surrounded by incredibly attractive women, who simpered over them and laughed at their comments. Wynter was uncommonly charming, it seemed, smiling more than she had ever seen but somehow, she knew, it was not genuine pleasure. He was

doing all of this for show. For who's benefit she could not tell, but if it was for her own, then it was a hurtful display.

"Shall you go and join them, Miss Frances?" Holton asked.

Frances hesitated, unsure. She didn't know if she had the confidence to approach a group that included the Prince Regent. She tried to catch Wynter's eye, to see if he might invite her over with a gesture of his hand, or a slight nod, but he didn't. Her heart rolled in turmoil as she saw him glance toward her, and then away as if he hadn't noticed her. She couldn't help but flush, fighting back a sudden sting behind her eyes at this very deliberate slight.

"I would not want to intrude," Frances said lamely, turning away so she did not have to look at Wynter's smiling, flirtatious face. Since their last conversation over Arabella's accounting, she had not spoken to him, though she had thought of him every minute of every day. She had regretted her words, regretted the way she had decided to discuss Arabella's deviations, and had hoped that at the ball tonight she might make amends. *Now that intention was blown away in the wake of her blazing, astonishing anger, how can he possibly call me a friend and then treat me like this?* She raged to herself, silently, then saw Arabella approaching herself and Holton.

"Holton! Go and tell Cook to send up some more pheasant tarts!" Arabella commanded, and Holton bowed gently, seeming impervious to her rude tone and smiling at Frances before he left. Arabella turned her critical gaze to Frances who steeled herself for her perusal. Frances had been struggling with Arabella since she had found the evidence of her deception of her brother. However, she knew a confrontation would never be appropriate. Wynter would never forgive her if she raised the issues with Arabella without his blessing, and he was already furious enough with her already. Frances had contained herself, forced herself to be civil in the continued planning of the ball, and in her diary written down every piece of evidence she had garnered against Arabella Adley. She felt sure that, one day, Arabella would receive her comeuppance for such outrageous behaviour, but in the meantime, Frances might greet the wolf in sheep's clothing with all the tenderness of a shepherd.

"How are you Arabella?" she asked.

"Well enough," Arabella huffed, "I might be better if my brother

would do his part and circulate with the many guests rather than preoccupy himself with just the one!"

"He is with the Prince Regent," Frances reasoned.

"Even so!" Arabella snapped, before taking in Frances' outfit. "What a sweet gown," Arabella said, but it was hardly a compliment, rather something she had dismissively as she glanced around the room.

"Thank you, Arabella. You look magnificent tonight."

Arabella preened like a peacock in the warmth of the compliment. She did indeed look flawless. She wore the grandest ivory gown Frances had ever seen, so ostentatious with seed pearls and embroidery - it might as well have been a wedding gown. Still, she could not be distracted for long from her grievance. Frances watched her glance over to Wynter and roll her eyes.

"For all the fuss he made over the finances tonight, he seems to be properly enjoying the festivities."

It hurt Frances to look at Wynter, so dashing in his dark jacket and his smart, green waistcoat. It hurt her to have his dandyish behaviour this evening pointed out, but Arabella was, of course, duly oblivious to her infatuation. After all, why would a woman like Arabella presume a lowly Baron's daughter like Frances had intentions toward her brother? Frances swallowed her pain and smiled stiffly.

"He looks very content," she said.

He seems to be surrounded by every beautiful woman in the county! She thought to herself. And plenty happy about it too!

Arabella nodded in agreement.

"He always is when this many beautiful women are around, and he has the company of the Prince." Arabella sighed. "He has always been like this - eager to play with hearts - rather than reveal his own."

Frances felt the unexpected truth of Arabella's words. They stung her deeply and chimed with everything Wynter had told her about himself in the stables. He was a notorious womaniser, she had known this

when she met him, and yet now was the first time when she had felt the awful burn of jealousy. Had Wynter ever revealed his heart to her, truly? Or was the harsh words spoken in the argument they had endured the truest representation of his feelings? She felt as if she were losing the man she had come to know. Briefly, she found herself wondering if this was how his wife had felt, but then she noticed Lord Hart approaching.

“Oh ho! What have we here?” Arabella said, her eyes glittering wickedly. “Has our dear little Frances found a suitor?”

Frances dearly didn’t want to explain Lord Hart’s interest in her, but she could tell Arabella had already worked it all out. There was no point in trying to explain it away; a woman like Arabella could see the steps of polite society like a chessboard, she always knew which way the pieces were moving.

“Excuse me,” Frances said. “I believe Lord Hart wants to speak with me.”

“I believe he does.” Arabella fluttered her fan, admiring Lord Hart’s long stride and height. “Go and enjoy yourself, my dear. It is the whole reason you came to Sinclair Manor after all. Is it not?”

There was a bite in that last question, but Frances tried to ignore it. She had come to Sinclair Manor for Wynter, and Wynter alone, and was certainly in far deeper than she expected. Her feelings were so intense, so unpredictable, that they frightened her a little. Having Wynter dismiss her in this manner was the most dismal she had felt since the death of her mother. Still, none of this could be shown on her face for Arabella to see. She said nothing, walking forward to meet Lord Hart whilst feeling Arabella’s keen eyes resting on the back of her neck.

“Miss Fortescue,” he bowed to her elegantly. “How lovely to see you.”

“Lord Hart.” She curtsied to him as finely as she could manage, knowing she must make a good impression on this man, who, if her father’s plans came to fruition, might well become her husband. “I am delighted to see you again.”

“I was hoping that I might engage you for the first dance?” he asked, offering his hand as the music started.

"I thank you. I would be happy to oblige you."

She nodded to him with a gentle smile as she put her hand in his, walking towards the centre of the ballroom with the other dancers as the fiddler began the introduction to a pleasant, easy dance. As she walked, Frances couldn't help but look over at Wynter and was surprised to notice that his intense eyes were following her, a slight frown between his eyebrows.

Frances held her head high in defiance on his gaze. If he was curious about who she was dancing with, he would have to come and speak to her - and stop acting like such a spoilt child! Or better yet, ask her to dance, like a proper gentleman might! She let go of Lord Hart's hand as they stood parallel to one another as the dance began, stepping forward in the line, hearing the low voices of the other dancing couples under the music.

"I have been speaking with your father," Lord Hart said.

"He has told me," Frances said. "I received a letter two days ago."

"He is a most interesting fellow!" Lord Hart commented earnestly. "I have always had an interest in art, and I learnt so much just from speaking to him!"

"Yes, he is very learned in his field."

As the couples moved, they drifted past the part of the room where the Prince Regent and Wynter stood with their entourage. She caught his gaze out of the corner of her eye. He was no longer smiling with flirtatious abandon, and now looked as stern as ever, perhaps more so, with his eyes fixed on her. Frances blushed. It was as if his gaze was made of hot light, and it burned her skin, impossible to ignore. She turned her attention back to Lord Hart, trying to focus, but it was very difficult to talk about art when she was aware of Wynter's eyes following her with every step.

"Your father says you have been staying here at Sinclair Manor?" Lord Hart asked.

"Yes, I have been the guest of the Duke and Lady Adley."

Lord Hart had his back to Wynter and unfortunately, he now stood

entirely in Frances' line of sight. She tried not to look at him and focus on the handsome, kind face of Lord Hart, but her eyes kept sliding over to him. He was leaning against the wall, rolling his glass of brandy in his hand and staring at her with an expression she couldn't quite read. She wasn't sure, but she thought she detected anger in the fiery depths of his eyes.

"You must be very blessed to have the acquaintance of the Duke of Sinclair," Lord Hart said. "He has a noble reputation."

Frances was so frustrated by Wynter's surly looks that she almost said that Wynter's reputation may be noble, but his actions at present were more akin to a young rogue than a man of nobility. However, she knew she could never say a bad word against him. Her heart forbade it. She nodded politely.

"Yes, he and his sister have been very generous hosts."

The music finished and Frances curtsied to her partner, thankful that she could move away from the dance floor and out from under Wynter's angry gaze, but when she rose up, she was surprised to be confronted by the tall figure of the Prince Regent.

"Well met, Miss Fortescue," he bowed to her, "and my Lord Hart," he nodded to her partner. "I see my little introduction between yourself and Baron Fortescue has already borne fruit?"

"Your majesty," Lord Hart bowed. "I am grateful for your introduction to Baron Fortescue and his family." He flashed a smile toward Frances. "I have been enjoying making their acquaintance."

"Well, come, let me make further introductions," said the Prince Regent, and Frances was askance when he led the two of them, Lord Hart guiding her way with her hand resting on his elbow, back towards the group surrounding Wynter. Frances saw that he looked as displeased at their arrival as she was.

"Wynter!" The Prince Regent called, "allow me to introduce Lord Hart, a friend of mine and Miss Fortescue's."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace," Lord Hart said, bowing smartly to Wynter.

Frances was shocked when Wynter, usually placing a premium on politeness and etiquette, only barely inclined his head and only said, "And you, also."

Then, he turned to one of the prettiest women beside him and held out his arm as if commanding her to dance with him. The two left the group quickly, the woman simpering. The Prince Regent frowned slightly watching his friend, and then his face was a smooth mask of contentment as he turned to the rest of the group.

"Lord Hart, will you forgive me if I borrow your dancing partner for a turn?" the Prince Regent said to Lord Hart, smiling at Frances.

"Of course," Lord Hart stepped back, giving Frances a reassuring smile. "If the lady permits it."

"I should be delighted, Your Majesty."

As Frances took the arm of the most powerful man in England, she felt strangely detached from herself. She had answered automatically, without even considering if it was what she wanted. Instead, she was driven along by the sense that the Prince Regent had a plan in play which she was only a pawn in, and that sense became even stronger when the heir to the throne led her forward, so they were standing beside Wynter and his dancing partner.

She noticed the way the Prince Regent raised his eyebrows as he stepped into place beside the disgruntled Duke. Now she had no doubt. The Prince Regent was planning something, she just didn't know what it was, and that thought made her intensely uneasy. Then the dance began. The choreography was such that as much as she danced with her partner, she would have to dance with the man diagonally across from her. That man was Wynter.

Be polite, she told herself, be distant, be appropriate, don't mention anything you shouldn't -

"Your father is very impressed by Lord Hart," the Prince Regent said as they stepped closer together.

"He is a very impressive man," Frances said carefully, not wishing to say more. The Prince Regent was, for some reason, speaking quite loudly and she could see Wynter out of the corner of her eye,

frowning irritably at his words.

“Indeed, and very eligible, too!” The Prince Regent smiled. “Like yourself, Miss Fortescue.”

Frances said nothing, stepping back into the line. Reluctantly, she looked over to Wynter as she had to step forwards, hands outstretched toward him. He grasped her hands firmly, tugging her a little closer than was strictly necessary.

“You seem to be attracting a lot of attention tonight, Miss Fortescue,” he muttered as they circled one another.

All her previous self-commands flew out of the window and her feelings engulfed her. She whipped her hand away from his as soon as she could, glaring.

“So do you,” Frances sniped, stepping back into formation.

She refused to look at him as she did a turn with the Prince Regent, their arms crossed for a moment, telling herself to maintain control of herself, but before she knew it Wynter’s large hands had engulfed her own and his body was close to hers.

“Lord Hart is known to your father? What is he to you?” His voice was urgent. “You’ve never mentioned him before, why is that?”

Once again, her sense of decorum evaporated.

“Why should you care, Wynter?” she challenged, looking up into his brown eyes. If he said he was caring for her or protecting her, then she was not sure she would be able to control her temper.

“We are friends,” he hissed.

That was worse. Frances felt herself puff up with molten anger as if a fire was spitting from her eyes.

“Friends!” She laughed cruelly in a whispered tone. “Don’t make me laugh, Wynter! Friends trust each other, friends do not slight one another, or behave as cruelly as you have done tonight.”

“Oh, so I suppose Lord Hart is your new friend?” His eyes flashed angrily.

“He is not.” Frances felt a rush of power at being able to say this as if she knew it would anger him and she found she didn’t care. “He is my suitor.”

Wynter’s face took on a stricken expression as Frances returned to the Prince Regent and danced the rest of the set, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw that his surprise was curdling into a rage. Her own sense of power changed rapidly to disappointment in herself. She was overwhelmed with a sense of shame, and as the dance completed, she bowed to the Prince Regent and then excused herself.

She walked quickly to the door of the ballroom and disappeared as swift as a ghost through a secret side door she knew came out onto the quiet corridor that leads to the study. She put her head in her hands, full of frustration. It was very unladylike of her to declare her suitor in public, especially as Lord Hart was so well-known in good society. Why did Wynter always bring out the worst in her?

“Frances!” The secret door banged open and Wynter stood there, tall and handsome and glowering down at her. Frances tried to look as if her heart hadn’t started racing as soon as she saw him. She lifted her eyebrows sardonically.

“Do you need something, Your Grace?”

His glare deepened at her words and then, taking her completely by surprise, He stepped forward, seized her hand and pulled her down the corridor toward the study.

“Come with me!”

“Wynter!” she exclaimed, jerking her hand out of his grip as he closed the door sharply behind them. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Are you going to marry him?” Wynter demanded, turning to face her.

“I’m not sure that is your concern,” Frances said, slightly disturbed but also astonished by his rash, angry behaviour. It was so unlike him to follow her like this, to ask her such demanding questions.

“Of course, it is my concern!” he exclaimed. “You only recently declared that you would only marry a man you loved! Do you love this man?”

His gaze was brutally intense, and Frances tried not to splutter underneath it.

“That- that is not the point!” She said. “Perhaps my concerns have changed. Perhaps now I see the value of marrying for circumstance instead!”

“Why would you change this about yourself?” he demanded.

“Perhaps I lost faith that I shall find a man who loves me for who I am!” Frances glared back. “Who will trust me completely, for instance.”

“So you throw yourself toward Lord Hart?” Wynter shouted. Frances had never seen him so enraged, but her own fury was mounting.

“I did not throw myself at him, unlike some people I could mention, who seem to entertain all manner of affectionate women without a thought for propriety!” Frances shouted back.

“You only danced with him to enrage me!” Wynter pointed his finger at her angrily.

“You ignored me and refused to speak to me!”

“You told me not to speak to you!” Wynter shouted. “Last time we spoke, you said -,”

“And was that an excuse to slight me? To fawn over other ladies like a cad?”

Wynter ran his hand through his dark hair, frustrated. “Exactly how badly do you think of me?”

“I don’t know!” Frances threw up her hands, noticing that her whole body was trembling with seething fury. “What am I supposed to think? You have waltzed around with all manner of ladies who seem to be your closest and most affectionate friends!”

“Those women are not my friends.” Wynter stepped closer to her in a rush, his teeth tight and jaw ticking. “Those women mean nothing to me, nothing compared to the friendship we share!”

Frances heart squeezed with emotion at his words, but she was still infuriated with him, with his strange, irrational behaviour and how he had dared to raise his voice to her with such passion. She stepped closer, lifting her defiant face towards him.

“How was I supposed to be aware of that, Wynter? What sign did you give me of that?”

Something changed in Wynter’s eyes. He grasped her arms, pulling her up onto tiptoes with rough hands. She gasped aloud but did not fight him, mesmerised by his eyes.

“This one,” he snapped, and he covered her mouth with his.

Chapter Twelve

Her hair was in his fingers, soft as angora fur. His hand encircled her waist, thumbs rubbing at the satin fabric of her dress and her warm skin beneath it. Her lips, God, her lips. Her mouth opened to his and her warm breath drew him in. She tasted of champagne and smelled of honey, and her hands clasped behind his head, he could feel her fingers tangled in his hair, digging into his skull. She pressed against him, the firm boning of her bodice rigid against his chest as he pulled her closer, losing his mind in the touch of her, the taste of her, the smell of her, his beautiful Frances finally here, in his arms.

“Do you understand?” he demanded, “Do you understand that they mean nothing to me?”

He moved his lips to the curve of her jaw, the perfect, pearly skin that lay there and felt a surge at the little gasp she emitted from her soft lips. The sound was like a battle call for him, driving him on, and suddenly he had nudged her back. Grasping her entire waist in the span of his hands and he lifted her slightly and pushed her back against the bookcase. Her eyes widened as the back of her head met with leather spines and she stared up at him, biting her lip.

“Tell me you understand, Frances.”

He pressed his finger against her lips, tracing their perfect shape. He loved the way they opened slightly under his touch, like a seashell. He was trembling with desire, but he needed to hear it.

“Tell me that you understand you mean more to me than anyone else,” he commanded her, grasping her face between his hands.

“I understand,” she whispered.

“And that we are friends, Frances, tell me that we are friends again.”

He could feel her own hands lifting from where they had been, flat back against the book to press against his chest, feeling the thrum of his racing heart.

“Tell me!” he commanded.

She grasped his shirt with both fists, pulling him closer, and Ralph tipped towards her, hesitating but a whisper away from her lips.

“Tell me,” he growled, nudging her nose with his own. Her breath was coming fast and quick now, the soft skin of her neck and rising breasts flushed and perfect. She made a little clicking sound in her throat, as if she was struggling to form words.

“We are friends again,” she whispered.

“Good,” he said, and then, because he had to, because the jealousy was too powerful to be halted, he said: “And Hart? Is he more your friend than I am?”

She could have broken him with her words again, just as she had when she had said, “He is my suitor,” in the ballroom - he had been filled with such avenging anger he could have killed the man with his bare hands, but this time she didn't. Her eyes were liquid pools of amber and gold and her pupils were enormous, pulsating and black, like a jungle tiger, Ralph suddenly thought. He could feel the power of her entrapping him, entrancing him, pulling him into her spell-like a siren or a mermaid. He couldn't have moved then even if armed militia had come in and demanded that he do so. He would rather have died with a bayonet in his back than leave her now. He licked his lips and asked again:

“What of Lord Hart, Frances? What is he to you? Tell me!”

He lowered his lips within a hair's breadth of her own, tantalizingly close, and heard her sharp intake of breath, “Tell me now,” he whispered.

She let out a shaking breath that seemed to rattle through her. Her hands grabbed his shirt even tighter.

“Nothing,” she whispered, “Nothing compared to you.”

Then her lips pressed against his. Fast, demanding, hot with need, she ravaged him. Ralph lost himself entirely in her kiss. Their bodies met, pressed together, and he was overwhelmed with the sensation of her flesh meeting his, thigh to thigh and chest to chest and he kissed her ever harder, drowning in a whirlpool of passion. He could feel her arms wrapping around him under his jacket, reaching up to clasp him even closer, and he pressed his knee between her legs, fitting their bodies even closer. She emitted the softest of gasps against his mouth and her breath was opium to him. His fingers dug into her hair, teasing out strands, enraged again at the thought of her dancing with another man, of another man admiring her. His hands grasped her waist, encircling it, taking hold of what he felt was rightly his and his alone, defying Lord Hart with every stroke and caress, erasing without words every touch another man had bestowed upon her in the course of a dance.

“Frances,” he whispered, as his kisses moved from her lips to her cheek and then her throat, where her pulse jumped erratically. “My sweet Frances.”

She gasped against his words and kisses and remarkably, in a way that made his whole-body melt, she arched her spin toward him, pressing the skin of her neck into his mouth. He moaned against her, his hands moving eagerly to wrap around her entirely through the space her arched back had made.

I must stop, I cannot stop, I cannot think, this cannot be happening, God, I think I love her -

She broke her face away, turning her lips from his in a breathless moment, “Ralph,” she whispered in his ear.

The use of his Christian name broke the spell. Suddenly, Ralph knew he was in his study, in his house, on the night of his sister’s charity ball and Frances’ own suitor was only moments away. This series of thoughts fell through his mind like a tumbling avalanche and he hurriedly stepped back, pulling his hands away from her as if he was burned.

“We must stop,” he gasped.

“What is it?” she asked, her hands falling to her sides. She was still pressed against the books, her dress rumpled from the pressure of his body against hers, her eyes dazed as if drunk. At that moment she looked so alluring, so tantalising and inviting that he almost didn’t recognise her and yet, at the same time, felt like he was truly seeing her as she was.

What have you done? A voice inside cursed him. What kind of man are you to have done this?

“Oh - Oh God -,”

He covered his eyes, unable to look at her. If he looked at her, he would be unable to stop himself taking her, sensuous and delightful, in his arms again and kissing her into oblivion, and he must not do that. He was filled with shameful memories of women taken in houses of ill-repute, of a reputation gained through amorous connections with too many of these ladies. Frances was not one of these women whose reputation could stand an association with him. She was young and innocent, and everyone would say she should have known better and stayed in her place. They would say she tried to catch him, and it served her right, he could hear them now. He would be the ruination of her, he knew it in his bones, and he would not let himself do it.

“Frances, forgive me.” He took a deep, steadying breath but did not open his eyes. He still couldn’t look at her. “I - I let myself get carried away.”

“You were not alone.” Her voice was too gentle. She did not understand the danger she was in; how close he had come to not being able to control himself.

She didn’t stop you, another sly voice said. She wants you, too, can’t you see it?

He pushed that voice away because however tempting it was entirely ignoble.

I will not be this man again!

“No, please do not excuse me.” He shook his head fervently. “You - you are a fine, upstanding lady and I - I should never have -,” he exhaled heavily. “I deeply regret my behaviour. It - it was ...

inexcusable.”

“Wynter? Please - look at me.”

He opened his eyes. His heart lurched with desire when his eyes took her in. She looked even more beautiful in the low light of the study, with her golden-red curls falling over her white neck and breast from where he had tugged them loose. Her lips were slightly swollen and prominent with a red flush that was mirrored in the blush on her collarbones. He wanted nothing more than to lower his head to them and kiss her. Her eyes glittered brightly, and he thought again of the eyes of jungle tigers he had seen in a painting. Perfect, mysterious, a pair of eyes you could drown in.

“I know you would never intentionally hurt me,” she said quietly.

“I did so tonight.” Ralph ran his hands through his hair. “I sought to make you jealous.”

“We both were not on our best behaviour this evening. Wynter, please don’t curse yourself.” She stepped toward him. “Do you curse me?”

“Never.” Her eyes were pleading. Ralph crossed his arms to keep from reaching to her. “But I should be cursed, Frances. I would destroy everything you have built with who I am alone. Intentionality has nought to do with it. I am - I am a plague to you.”

“You are too hard on yourself,” she whispered. “Don’t say so. I am honoured to be your friend; you are not the man you think you are.”

She’s wrong, the voice inside him said, and for the first time, he recognised it. There, sitting in his heart was the voice of Lowenna, long dead but still alive in her grief. *She doesn’t know what you did to me, Ralph, she doesn’t understand the tragedy you are capable of, but I do. You will ruin her.* He could not silence it.

“These were not the actions of a friend.”

God help him, his voice trembled as he spoke, partly from the fear of speaking the words but partly from the fear of losing her. Still, he must speak them, the voice inside commanded him.

“They were the actions of that young man we spoke of in the stable master’s lodge, the man who lost himself in games and women and cared not for the hearts of those who loved him.”

“You cannot blame yourself forever, Wynter.”

She stepped closer to him, her hands resting on his crossed arm and squeezing to grab his attention. Her touch was at once gratifying and frustrating, for whilst he was comforted by it, he knew he must not pull her closer. He tried to step back, but her grip was firm.

“No, you cannot, and you must hear this. I am not a fragile flower to be crushed beneath your boot - I have my own will in this situation, and you did not take me against my desires. I - I kissed you, Wynter. Can’t you see that?”

I kissed you.

Ralph stared at her longingly. Weren’t those the words he needed to hear? That she had wanted him too, had longed for him just as he had longed for her? She was a marvel, standing here before him, eighteen years old and yet inimitable. She was so bright and alive and headstrong, her words full of passion and meaning but all he could see was a woman ripe with potential happiness, that he must pull away from, lest he sullied it, as he always did. He stepped further back, shaking his head.

“I know what you think you felt,” he said. “I know you felt the dizzying power of my desire, and believe me, Frances, it is... deep.” He took a shaking breath and continued. “But it was wrong of me to ever introduce you to such passions - you are too young, too pure for this kind of... treatment.”

“Treatment?” Frances’ eyes blazed with fire and she moved towards him. “This was not something that was done to me, Wynter. Do you not think for one moment that my passion might equal yours?” Frances demanded.

The words almost made his heart stop, but he pushed them aside, determined as he was to ensure she understood the immutable fact he was building towards: She could not trust him. She could not rely on him. She should not wish something from him that he could not or would not provide.

“Frances, you do not understand.” He closed his eyes against the pain of what he had to share, but he could not lie to her. “You cannot fathom the brutal tongues of the rumours of high society.”

“Do you think I care what those gossips think?” Frances looked earnestly up into his face. She was so endearing, so ready to fight the world. She didn’t realise that the world always won and then you were left, empty as husk, alone.

“Should we deny the passions we both feel for the sake of their judgemental stares and gazes?”

“Yes,” He said, frankly. “We should. You cannot be associated with me *and* maintain a good reputation. I - I am -,”

Unfaithful. It was the word Lowenna had used, along with many others. Perfidious, adulterous, treacherous, cold, unfeeling, these were the accusations that haunted his dreams and never left him. They had followed him through these many years. Unrelenting, never permitting a genuine connection with a lady and only permitting loose working girls within his reach, for then the words could return afresh. *This is who you are, this is all you deserve.* Yet he could never speak them aloud. He stumbled over the words.

“I - I do not have a good reputation with ladies.”

“A man is more than his reputation, Wynter.”

“I am inconstant, Frances.” His heart twisted as he said it aloud. *Inconstant, unreliable, philanderer, adulterer.* The words marched around his head and he closed his eyes against them.

“That’s not true,” Frances whispered. “You have not been inconstant with me.”

“I would be in the future, I always am. I am... naturally discontent.”

He recalled their conversation when they had ridden together, discussing the nature of contentment. Lowenna’s voice returned to him now; a cold rebuke in the weeks before her death: *Nothing is enough for you. Nothing ever will be.*

“Lowenna knew it, the Ton knows it, and I know it in my soul. I would only cause you sorrow.” He shook his head as she opened her mouth to speak. “It is no use, Frances. Any passion that you have felt here tonight must be stifled, immediately.”

“What if it will not be stifled? What then?”

He opened his eyes and gazed into her young, sweet face, full of hope and trust. He hated himself for what he was about to say, but he must say it:

“Then divert the focus of its affections. Save your passion for a man who deserves it, who can be worthy of you. A man who will... honour that passion in the right way. Do not think of me, please, Frances.”

Think of me! His heart cried out. *Think only of me!* Yet he clamped his mouth shut and would not let it speak. He simply gazed at her, trying to commit to memory the unguarded vulnerability of her: Her chest rising and falling with quick breaths, her hair loose and an unkempt, her skin flushed. *Good God, she was flawless.* He could not stand and look at her this way any longer.

“You must go now, Frances,” he said hoarsely. “Please - I - I need you to go now.”

She nodded slowly, as if she was seeing the very core of his turbulence.

“Of course, Wynter. I shall do as you ask.”

She reached up with delicate fingers to tuck her curls back behind her ears, but one slipped out, fluttering across her brow, a perfect spring of golden-red lock. Before he could stop himself, Ralph had reached out across the distance between them and brushed it out of her eyes. His hand rested tenderly on the side of her cheek, losing himself in the fiery amber depths of her irises.

“No matter what happens,” his voice cracked with emotion. “No matter where you go in this life, Frances, I shall be your friend. I promise to stand by your side, always.”

He saw Frances’ eyes were shimmering with unshed tears. She stepped back, nodding quickly and looking away, as if afraid that another

moment looking into his face would unravel her completely.

“And I, you.” She cleared her throat. “Good night, Your Grace.”

He recognised what she was doing, retreating behind the formalities of their titles to make this parting more bearable, but his heart broke knowing that this might be the last time he ever had her like this. When they were simply man and woman, alone in the world, their true feelings visible on their faces, and the air alive with their desire. He nodded; his own throat thick with emotion.

“Good night, Miss Fortescue.

She left without looking back. Ralph stood for several long minutes, it could have been only two, it could have been twenty, his furiously working mind could not account for the passing of time. Then, when he could finally think no more, and to stifle his own trembling, he crossed to the cupboard by his desk and removed a bottle of whisky and a crystal tumbler. He poured himself a sizeable measure and gulped it back, wincing, as he stared with sightless eyes out over the dark landscape of his estate. All he could see was Frances’ face. *Good Lord, what have I done?*

“Sir?” Holton stood in the doorway, a concerned expression on his face. “Lady Arabella is requesting you return to the ballroom, sir.”

“Of course she is.” Ralph tipped another measure into his glass. “Did Miss Fortescue return?”

“She did, sir.”

Ralph’s heart skipped a beat. What would happen if anyone noticed they had been absent at the same time? He set the tumbler to his lips.

“How did she account for her absence?”

“Very easily, sir,” Holton said. “She mentioned she had gone from the ballroom to say good night to Matilda.”

Ralph nodded and sipped. “Good. And myself?”

“The Prince Regent explained loudly that you had a household matter

to attend to.”

Good old George. He had been the one who had pushed Ralph out of the ballroom, literally nudging him with his elbow and hissing, “Follow her, man!”

“No one saw any significance in Miss Frances and yourself being absent from the ballroom at the same time,” Holton continued as if this was a question that had been asked of him, and not an explanation that Ralph desperately needed but was too afraid to enquire after.

“The balcony doors are open to let in the night air; many guests are mingling outside and in the gardens.”

Ralph nodded again, feeling relieved at Holton’s words. The anxiety in his chest lessened slightly.

“And where is Miss Fortescue now?” he asked.

“She is dancing with Lord Hart.”

Ralph tipped the measure of whisky down his throat at those words, happy for the burn in his nose that made his eyes sting, and plausibly covered up the tidal wave of sadness he had felt.

“Very good then.” He set his tumbler down. “I am going out, Holton.”

“Out sir?”

“Indeed.”

“When shall you be back?”

“Later. Once the guests have gone. I shall ride over the hills for a while and enjoy the moonlight.”

Holton stared at Ralph for a moment and then asked, his voice much quieter, “Are you quite alright, sir?”

“I will be.” Ralph strode to the door. “Send my apologies to my sister.”

Within ten minutes, he was galloping over the hills, away from the house and away from Frances. The relief of the wind in his face was not enough to quell his desires, nothing was. He kept on riding and did not stop, not even when the hot, summer night broke into a typical summer storm, the humid air fizzing with the scent of August lightning, and the rain pelting down upon his head. He pushed on, driving his horse through the sheets of water until both were soaked to the skin.

Still, it was not enough. Even with cold fabric chilling him to the bone, it was not enough to calm the fire inside his heart. No matter how far he rode he would still see her face. No matter where he went, he would still hear her melodious voice - asking the most heavenly and damning question he had ever heard: *Do you not think for one moment that my passion might be equal to yours?* It was not possible, Ralph thought, not in a million lifetimes that anyone's passion might equal his own. What he felt for Frances was all-consuming, a living fire that threatened to burn him alive. And he had sent her away. There was nothing to be done but to keep riding.

Chapter Thirteen

Evening of Lady Arabella's charity ball.

This night has been the most magical of my life, but also one of the most sorrowful. How can someone feel so much elation, so much joy and also so much frustration and pain? How can things feel so abundantly clear one moment, as if I have understood the very fabric of myself, the very reason for my existence - and then the next be so confounding, as if I am lost in a forest of fog? Should love feel so dangerous, so complex? When Ralph took me into the study, I couldn't have thought anything like that was going to occur - why should I expect it? After all, he had been so cold during the dance and then he shouted at me (no surprises there) and then took me in his arms and -

Frances couldn't continue writing. She threw her quill down in frustration and slammed her diary shut, leaning back in her chair as if to stretch as far away from the words as she possibly could. Outside, the darkness of the night was turning towards morning. The ball had run into the early hours of the morning, as these events often did. The guests, exhausted from hours of dancing, and talking, and fine food, had stumbled into their carriages and rattled off home. Arabella had hobbled up to her bedchamber with the assistance of her maid. Philip had been practically comatose with brandy, having fallen into a stupor where he sat. The servants had simply thrown a blanket over him and left him where he was slumped. Frances had not seen Ralph again.

He had not returned to the ball. Frances had tried her best not to be overly affected by their interaction in the study, even though it had shaken her to her very core. She had returned to the company of Lord Hart and the Prince Regent, who had looked at her keenly, as if he had known exactly what had taken place between her and Ralph - but said nothing. She danced another dance with Lord Hart, demonstrating for all the company her clear preference for him as a potential suitor, and had spent the rest of the evening in his company.

She tried to be distracted by his kindness and generosity, his interest in her family, his good conversation - but she couldn't be. He was handsome, anyone could see that, for he stood tall (though not as tall as Ralph) and had soft brown hair (though not as dark as Ralph's) and kind eyes (though not as intelligent as Ralph's). Frances immediately noticed how other young ladies looked at her in admiration as he danced with her, and stood with her, and talked with her well into the night. Yet she felt no overwhelming satisfaction. Instead, she felt weary. Eventually, attentive as he was, Lord Hart noticed her fatigue.

"Are you quite well, Miss Fortescue?" he asked as the clock chimed for one o'clock in the morning. The crowd of the ballroom was already beginning to thin - the dancing had ended, many gentlemen had retired to the billiards room, and some ladies had retired to the little parlour for sweet cakes and tea. Frances had found herself sitting on a cold, stone bench on the terrace with many other revellers, having quiet conversations in pairs.

"Are you too cold? Would you prefer to go inside?" he asked.

"I am well," she smiled at him. "Only a little weary."

"Yes, my goodness!" He glanced at a gold pocket watch he pulled from his jacket. "Why, we have whiled away the hours!"

"Yes, Lord Hart. It shall be dawn soon."

"I am unsure time has ever moved so rapidly," he said, smiling at her. "But then it never moves as quickly as it does in the company of a beautiful lady."

Frances smiled politely back but could not be moved by his words. They were sweet and flattering, but they sounded like words he had said to other ladies before. Not like the words that Ralph had spoken that had seemed to come from his deepest heart.

"I fear the night grows too long for me, Lord Hart." Frances stood up, brushing her gown down. "I believe it is time for me to retire."

"You must let me escort you to the staircase." He stood also, offering her arm with a show of gallantry, and she smiled, allowing it.

They walked back through the ballroom. With every step, Frances

scoured the remaining faces for signs of Ralph but did not see him. She wondered about his not returning to the party - he had infuriated Arabella who spent the rest of the night making various excuses for him – and then having whispered, angry conversations with Holton in corners. It seemed that after their encounter, Ralph was refusing to return to the crowded room. Frances didn't wonder why. If she had a choice, she would have spent the rest of the evening hiding under her bed covers, trying not to weep.

"Thank you for a lovely evening, Miss Fortescue," Lord Hart said as they reached the foot of the stairs.

"Thank you also, Lord Hart."

She offered her hand for him to kiss, but he hesitated, instead taking hold of it gently in his gloved fingers. "I understand you will be returning to your father's house soon," he said. "If you would permit it, I should like to call on you there."

"You are always welcome, Lord Hart."

She wished she felt something as he held her hand, some flicker of feeling or magic but there was nothing. He smiled at her.

"I should like to, if it is possible, spend some time discussing the future at our next meeting, if you might be amenable to that suggestion."

Frances had imagined many times over the years how a proposal might be made to her. She had imagined earnest looks, romantic words, and a man who's world revolved around only her happiness about to sweep her off her feet. She had not imagined this. A man suggesting that he would on their next meeting propose marriage in the same way he might suggest they discuss the merits of different horse breeds. She didn't know what to say, and the only response seemed to be -

"Of course, Lord Hart."

He kissed her hand then, a dry peck of lips to skin that only left her cold. He then bowed respectfully toward her. She looked at him, and for a moment, time seemed to stop around her as she considered him: a stable, generous gentleman whom her father had picked. He was

eminently suitable for her; she would be a fool to refuse him. He was not Ralph, but then she could not have Ralph, or so he said. She thought about Ralph's kisses on her lips and then saw Lord Hart's honest, sweet face. *It isn't fair*, a voice rebuked her inside. *What you are doing isn't fair to either of them.*

"Goodnight, Lord Hart."

She hurried up to her bedroom, eager to be out of his sight, and immediately opened her diary. She had tried to write down her experience with Ralph, but it suddenly seemed sordid to record what had happened - when she had just all but accepted the proposal of another man. As she looked at the words she had written, she began to flip the pages back, glancing over the paper and seeing phrases jump out at her.

I can catch him if only I can hold his attention a little longer

He seems particularly to enjoy me when he is intellectually engaged, I must attempt to use that to my advantage ...

When I am his wife, I shall be more secure than Amelia, more secure than any other lady in society and no one will be able to shame me.

They were the scribbblings of a selfish girl, she realised, not a woman and certainly not a lady. Then she sought out her most recent entries and felt her heart clench.

Wynter has the most wonderful laugh. Each time I hear it I am filled with joy for it is so hard-won, you feel you must have said something truly amusing to have earned it.

Wynter's smile is the most encouraging I have ever encountered. If I am desolate or fatigued, I only need to see the smallest twitch at the corner of his mouth and the soft creasing around his eyes to be refreshed entirely.

I have never talked with anyone the way I talk with Wynter. He brings something out of me that no one else does, as if my thoughts can run free and I can truly articulate myself in a way that has never been permitted. I wish that I had the capability to improve others the way that he does.

There it all was, the evidence of how she had begun to love this man. How she had started to live and die by his glances, his looks and his

words of affirmation. Then she thought of the way he had kissed her, how he had held her close, as if he were a drowning man and she might save him. How his lips had been so firm, so insistent, that it had taken her breath away. She had never thought she could desire someone, not for their wealth or status, but for who they were, the very flesh of them. If he were poor and lonely - she would still want him, she was sure of that. He wanted her too, so desperately he had sent her away.

Frances groaned at that thought and pushed her diary away, noticing as she stood up and looked over the grey mists of morning, a lone rider returning. She seemed to know without seeing that it was him, and gasped, stepping closer to the glass. What was he doing out there? Had he been out all night? He could not see her, she was much too far away, but she pressed her hand against the glass anyway. She didn't want to hurt him, and she knew deep down inside that by pursuing him, she was causing him grief. He could not reconcile his desire for her in a positive way, he could not imagine a world in which she could love him, and he could love her, scarred as he was by his past marriage. All she was doing in remaining at Sinclair Manor was causing him distress. She sighed to herself, her hand clenching into a small fist. She knew what she must do. She sat back down and opened her diary, setting pen to paper once more:

Whatever I feel for Ralph Wynter, I can no longer allow myself to live in his presence. He cannot love me as I love him, his heart is too fragile, and I fear I will break it. I would rather die. I have come into his life and selfishly shaken his world without a thought for his own feelings. I thought men were only to be won or seduced, I did not consider that this man could be the most treasured friend of my life. I shall do right by him, though it pains me. I must for once in my life, do the right thing.



Frances requested an audience with Ralph first thing in the morning before the rest of the house had even risen. She dressed as plainly as she possibly could, foregoing her usual low-cut gowns for something with a more modest, matronly trim in a soft green that was suitable for travelling. She packed her trunk and wrote a small note for Matilda that read:

Dearest Tilly,

It has been a great pleasure to have your friendship during my stay at Sinclair Manor. I hope that will want to continue it and look forward to exchanging letters with you. I hope your father will allow you to visit me, for you will always be welcome.

With warmest regards,

Your friend, Franny Fortescue.

When she reached the foot of the stairs, her trunk had already been carried out to the waiting carriage, Holton was waiting to escort her to Ralph's study. His normally composed face was full of concern as he looked down at her, eyes sympathetic.

"We are sorry you shall be leaving us, Miss Frances," he said. "You have been a wonderful guest - a great help to all. You shall be missed."

"Thank you." Frances found a lump forming in her throat. "I have been most happy here, Holton. Here -," she passed him her note for Matilda. "Will you ensure that the Lady Wynter receives this? I should not her to feel I have taken my leave without considering her."

"Might you not wait until she rises?" Holton suggested gently. "She will be heartsick to have missed your departure."

Frances shook her head. "No, I must go, I think but -,"

Frances hesitated, thinking of Arabella's books. She couldn't leave without leaving some clue about the embezzlement that was taking place under Holton's nose. What if it came to light later and Arabella blamed it on the well-meaning butler?

"Holton, I - I noticed some discrepancies in the accounting for the ball," she said in a quiet voice.

"Indeed?" Holton's tone matched her own, but she could see his dark eyes were alert.

"Yes, I - I could have sworn that the invoices Lady Arabella had me validate did not align with the costings on your accounts."

“Is that so?” Holton’s voice had grown softer and gaze inexplicably darted up the stairs.

“It is possibly a mistake,” Frances went on carefully, “but it might be worthwhile checking the accounts again - and speaking to the vendors for the ball directly to create your own inventory of what they were charged. I - I worry that someone is taking advantage of... the family.”

Holton stared at her for a moment but then nodded gravely.

“I shall do that, Miss Frances,” he said. He held out his hand to guide the way. “Might I take you through to the Duke now? He is expecting you.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Holton.”

“He is in the library.”

As they stepped aside to walk around behind the stairs to the grand library, Frances saw a shuffling of a slow-moving body out of the front parlour. She jumped, worried that it might have been Arabella listening in the shadows, but it was not. Only a still-inebriated Philip, finally roused from his intoxicated slumber by the waking of the house. Last night the gin and whist tables had been arranged in the front parlour and it was there that Philip had fallen into slumber. He did not look well. He was incredibly pale, almost green, and very startled to see her in his drunken state, scuttling away before she could even say good morning. Holton stopped outside the library door.

“When you are ready to leave simply come to the front doors, Miss Frances,” Holton said. “We shall set you on your way.”

“Thank you.”

Holton nodded and tapped on the door. Hearing the murmur within he pushed open the door, stepping back so Frances could enter and then closing the door behind her. Ralph sat in one of the wing-backed chairs by the fire, a steaming cup of tea at his hand. He rose slowly as she entered. He looked exhausted. She wondered if he had slept.

“Frances,” he said, then closed his eyes in a rebuke to himself for using her first name after the night before. “Forgive me, Miss

Fortescue.” He sighed and straightened his back as if trying to pull strength from within himself. “How might I help you?”

“I have come to say farewell.”

Frances looked down at her bonnet in her hands, twisting the ribbons. Just being in his presence was much harder than she thought it would be.

“Farewell?” he echoed.

“I’m leaving.”

His face was blank for a moment, he didn’t move.

“When?” he asked.

“Now.”

“This moment? Now?”

“Yes.”

He stepped forward, his hands held up, his eyes wide.

“Frances, if this is about last night, you have my earnest apologies, I could not be more apologetic -,”

“Lord Hart has made his interest known,” Frances interrupted him, quickly. “It is no longer appropriate for me to remain in your home.”

He stopped moving. She worried he had stopped breathing. She saw a flash of pain break over his face, but then he composed himself, breathing out heavily. He looked down at his boots, hands on his hips.

“When?” he asked. “When did he do this?”

Frances swallowed. “Last night.”

“Last night?” Ralph shook his head slightly, emitting a little huff of laughter. “Quite an evening then.”

Frances couldn't help but bristle a little at his tone. She stared at him, challenging his bravado silently. He bowed his head under her stare.

"You asked me to do this," she warned quietly. "You said it was the right thing, for both of us."

"I know I did."

Ralph closed his eyes tight, and she saw the tiny lines around his eyes crease slightly. How she wanted to kiss each and every one. She swallowed hard again; her throat painfully tight. Despite the resolve she had committed to last night, the fact that she must leave him indeed if he were ever to be happy, her heart faltered at the sight of him. She could not go without asking him, one final time.

"Do - do you still mean it?" she asked, so quietly she barely dared to say it.

Say no! Her heart screamed. Please God, say no! Ask me to stay and let me love you, as I truly can!

Ralph looked at her for a long moment, and in a flash of shared memory, she recalled the way he had pushed her against the bookcase, the firm ridges of book spines against her back - his warm, insistent hands and urgent mouth on her own. She knew then that he was remembering it too, smelling again the tang in their mingled scents, the feeling warmth of their shared flesh. Ralph turned away from her, placing both hands on the mantelpiece and staring into the fire. She realised then why he had chosen the library for their audience rather than the study - he had wanted to quell any memories. It hadn't worked. What had happened between them would be carried wherever she went. It would never leave her now.

"Yes," he said, his jaw tense. "I still mean it."

Frances nodded, gulping back her disappointment. *Do the right thing, she told herself, you at least owe him that.*

"Then I believe there is nothing more to say."

"You will marry him?" Ralph asked, his head hanging down between his arms.

“Yes,” Frances choked out the words, her fingers trembling. “If he asks.”

“You think he will?”

“He has said so.”

Ralph laughed humourlessly again. “Damn him.”

“You do not mean that,” Frances said, shaking her head. Her heart was full of sorrow, but she would not let him turn to bitterness. “He has not won me from you. I could never say such a thing of whoever might be your wife in the future. I shall only ever wish you well.”

“You could not say it, because there never will be another duchess.” He stood up slowly, facing her again, his eyes dark with the glow of the fire. “But you will be married by the time the year is out. Yes, I think I will say damn him, not because I wish him ill, but because he could never deserve you.” He shook his head ruefully. “No man ever could.”

Frances couldn’t fight the tear that escaped her stinging eyes and fell on her cheek. She took shallow gulps of air, trying to control herself. *You could!* Her heart cried out. *You could, if you would only have me!* She fought to control herself, standing up straight.

“I thought I had found one who might,” she whispered. “But I was told, by a good friend, that I was quite mistaken that I should not think of him.”

She looked at him, willing him to take it back but he didn’t. He looked down. His dark hair flicked across his forehead, but he said nothing. She steeled herself and carried on.

“I am resolved to trust that friend of mine, who has made his feelings so clear, and to honour his request as best I can.”

“He sounds like a sensible friend,” Ralph smiled ruefully. “You should listen to him.”

“I shall.” Frances took a tremulous breath. “I believe this is the parting of our ways, Your Grace.”

“Yes.”

He stood quite still, as still as a statue. Frances knew that he was rooted to the spot, in determination, forcing himself not to come near her or touch her. It made her heart pine for him. This will be the last time, she told herself. She could not help herself from walking slowly towards him, as carefully as one would approach a wild animal, until she stood right in front of him. He looked down on her with eyes full of sorrow and tried to smile.

“Goodbye, my dear friend,” she whispered up at him.

She leaned herself up on tiptoe and pressed her lips tenderly to his cheek. She had meant it only to be a sweet moment but in a second his lips had moved, both of his hands were around her face and he was kissing her, hard, filling her breath with all the words he could not say and all the longing she felt inside. Then, a moment later, it was over.

“Goodbye,” Ralph said, hoarsely, but he did not let go.

Instead, they stood, eyes closed, their foreheads pressed against one another. Their shared, heavy breaths, and Frances’ tears, mingling in the little space between their cheeks.

Then, after a minute or so had passed, they broke apart. Frances wiped her tears and left without speaking. Ralph walked along slowly behind her. From inside the hallway, he watched her take Holton’s hand to be helped into the carriage. He watched her settle in her seat and stoically refuse to look out of the window. He watched the carriage pull away, dragging Frances away from him, until he could no longer bear to watch it. His head spun with the intensity of it, the dizzying realisation that she was really gone, lost to him forever. He swayed where he stood, reaching out to grasp the end of the stair rail only to stumble, knocking over the candlestick with a loud, metal clunk.

“Sir, are you well?”

Holton was beside him in a moment, steadying him with a firm hand on his shoulder and an arm to lean on.

“She’s gone,” Ralph gasped, one hand tugging at the stock at his

throat. He felt hot, as if his skin was suddenly on fire, and he couldn't breathe without her. "Frances!"

"Sir!"

Ralph collapsed, his knees buckling and his mind falling into darkness.

Chapter Fourteen

“Sir? Sir, are you alright?” Holton tried to wake his master who had slipped into a faint at his feet.

“Someone help!” he shouted, and other servants came running, amazed to see their lord and Master collapsed in a heap on the marble floor. “Someone ride for the doctor, someone fetch smelling salts and brandy! Go! Go!”

The servants jumped into action as Holton tried to sit the Duke up against his chest, his head loose. He pressed a hand against Wynter’s brow and cursed.

“What is happened?” called the housekeeper, Mrs Bury, bustling up with a vial of smelling salts and snifter of brandy. “Did he have a fall?”

“I think he has taken a fever, Mrs Bury,” Holton said, taking the smelling salts and waving them under Wynter’s nose. He rolled his head and then jerked awake, eyes heavy and red-rimmed.

“My Lord? My Lord Wynter? Can you hear me?”

“Mm mm hmm,” Wynter moaned, trying to stand but Holton held him down, gesturing for Mrs Bury to hand him the snifter. He sent it to Wynter’s lips. “Drink this sir, for it’s a climb to your bedchamber and we’ll not be able to carry you there.”

Wynter swallowed it gratefully, his eyes still unfocused and patches of pink rising high on his cheeks, but at least he no longer trembled like a leaf.

“Right, Mrs Bury, run ahead and prepare His Grace’s room,” Holton

commanded, and Mrs Bury bustled ahead, muttering lists to herself, and shouting to the serving girls to fetch cool water and towels. Holton looked down on Wynter. "We shall have to relocate, I am afraid, sir."

"Whatever you say, Barty."

Holton was surprised. His master had not called him by his Christian name since they were boys playing together. Something was very amiss. He shrugged it off, however, and turned to the steward beside him.

"Take His Grace's other arm there and - up!"

The three men staggered upwards, Wynter's feet dragging along as they took the stairs at a slow pace, accounting for the Duke's inability to stand on his own and his huge, muscular size. He was a very fit man, other gentlemen often admired him, but he was near enough an impossible dead weight when asleep. Between them, they made it to the landing - and were met with the pinched face of Lady Arabella.

"What is the meaning of all this racket?" she shouted.

Holton was surprised to see her awake for she tended to stay abed the whole day following a ball, demanding that jellies and brandy be brought to her - and devilled eggs be made to settle her nauseous stomach from too much liquor. Then Holton saw her impossible son slouching in the doorway, looking positively green, and was sure he had slinked upstairs to tell his mother that Miss Frances was leaving.

"His Grace is unwell," Holton said, shortly. "We are taking him to bed."

"Oh, he only imbibed too much last night along with the rest of us!" Arabella scoffed. "Let him sleep it off where he falls!"

Holton heard a gasp from the servants in the hallway below who had heard this terrible comment. The idea that the Lord of the manor would sleep anywhere other than his own bed was atrocious, and a little treasonous. Holton was reminded again how little he enjoyed Arabella Adley.

"It would hardly be appropriate," Holton said. "Please excuse us."

“You are not excused,” Arabella pouted petulantly as Holton and the steward manoeuvred the Duke further along the hallway. “What are you thinking of, shouting and waking the whole house like this over one man’s poor stomach?”

They had reached the Master bedroom. The men heaved Wynter inside as Mrs Bury quickly pulled back the coverlets so the master of the house could flop onto them, as limp as a rag doll. Arabella snorted.

“See? He is in liquor, Holton, not at deaths door! Watch where you’re going, girl!”

Arabella was pushed aside by a rushing servant girl carrying towels, clearly roused to great urgency by Mrs Bury.

“Set ‘em towels in the water there, lass,” Mrs Bury commanded, with the confidence of a woman who had nursed and cared for Lord Wynter of Sinclair since he was a boy. “We must get the cool him down.”

“Now really!” Arabella shouted. “This is much too much fuss to be made of a man who spent all night riding in the rain! He has simply drunk himself silly over the loss of that little filly of his, and all he needs is a good pinch! Stop it, immediately I say!”

The serving girls stopped what they were doing to stare at Lady Arabella. Mrs Bury bit her lip, and raised her eyes to high heaven, as if praying to the good Lord for the strength not to scream at her mistress. The steward looked at his boots and Holton was reminded intensely of the kind of child Arabella had been. He had known her all his life, and she had always been selfish and conceited, the kind of child who would arrange mischief and blame it on the servants, not wincing for a moment if a scullery maid was beaten - or a kitchen boy dismissed. She only cared for her own self-interest, not even valuing her son in any way except for how he could bring prestige to her own name. She was a drain on Sinclair Manor, a leech of time, resources, and good temper. When Frances Fortescue had suggested that there was an accounting error, Holton had known exactly where he should look.

Suddenly, a breathless kitchen boy appeared at the door.

“Doctor’s ‘ere, Mr Holton, sir!” He announced. “Shall’s I send him in?”

“The doctor?” Arabella threw up her hands, “Really, Holton?”

“Lady Arabella, I would beg a word of you,” Holton said, nodding to Mrs Bury as he guided Arabella out of the room.

“Lady Arabella, I am sorry if this distresses you,” Holton said quietly, surreptitiously guiding Arabella back down toward her own suite - where Philip stood, sullenly waiting. “But your brother collapsed downstairs not moments ago. He fainted in a fever, that is why the doctor has been called.”

“Oh, that is just what he gets for riding all night in the rain!” Arabella snapped, unrepentant for her earlier lack of sympathy, now that Wynter’s true condition was revealed. She watched the doctor march hastily past. “It will only be a cold!”

“Be that as it may, my Lady, what with the Lady Wynter being so very young, we should not take any chances.”

Arabella shrugged, as if the concept of her brother dying, leaving her niece an orphan, was of no concern to her.

“Do not worry yourself, Holton,” she said. “Sinclair Manor has a fine heir, if ever the need should arise for one.”

The sound of retching came from inside her suite and Holton raised his eyebrows. Clearly her idea of the future heir of Sinclair Manor was currently vomiting up last night’s festivities in his mother’s chamber pot. Holton clenched his fists. Of all the hard, unfeeling women in the world, Arabella Adley was surely of the worst kind. She could happily speak about her only brother’s demise - if it meant she would have access to more of his fortune, and she could not care less for his child, unless she served Arabella’s purpose in some way.

Holton wished he might simply close her suite door in her face and lock her in, but that would certainly lose him his job. With his master out of commission at the moment, there was every chance Arabella would have him hung, drawn, and quartered for such insubordination before the Lord of the manor even had a chance to recover. Holton would have to take his revenge in other ways.

“Lady Adley, I have had an invoice sent to me from the flower sellers,” he lied. He watched Arabella’s face. He immediately noticed the switch in her demeanour, from dismissive and sardonic to watchful and careful.

“You have?” she said, her voice light, but Holton was not fooled. He had known Arabella long enough to see when she was listening casually, and when she was hanging on a person’s every word.

“I have.” Holton went on. “It seems there might be inconsistencies in the numbers produced in our regular update, and the details of the flower vendors costings.” He waved a hand in a show of indifference. “I am sure it is a fault on their part.”

“Oh yes, I am sure it was,” Arabella said, jumping on his suggestion. “I shall not use them again if they give such incorrect information.”

“That would be my recommendation,” Holton said. “But in the meantime, it might be prudent for me to assess the other vendors for the charity ball last night. I shall be coordinating a review, just to ensure we are not being taken advantage of.”

“Well, that - that sounds very suitable, Holton,” Arabella said, nodding vigorously. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I shall dress and breakfast since the whole house is awake anyway! If you could see fit to divert some of Cook’s attention to preparing some devilled eggs -,”

“- and bacon potatoes -,” came a grim, burbling voice inside.

“- and bacon potatoes, I would be most grateful!”

Arabella slammed the door in his face, and Holton heard the quick, rushed whispers of between her and her son from behind the door. Holton smiled. Let them plot, and plan, and dissemble. Frances had already told him all he needed to know. Holton was far more intelligent than Arabella gave him credit for. As soon as Frances had begun to speak about possible miscalculations, he had begun to weave it together with memories of the time he had observed her in Arabella’s study.

He recalled the way she had asked for Arabella’s accounting book, and then seemed dissatisfied. He recalled the way she had then feigned dropping something, to reach into the drawer again. After that time,

she had been quiet as she looked at the same account book, her eyes wide. She had obviously uncovered a different book in the drawer and hidden it inside the other. Arabella would never imagine Holton would consider plundering her private space for evidence, but Holton knew there was nothing he wouldn't do for Wynter. As soon as Arabella was down at breakfast - he would go in and see for himself. From the way Frances had spoken, her careful words and well-chosen phrases, he had a feeling that Arabella might be up to some terrible mischief again, and he would be damned before he saw her hoist blame onto one of his staff, just like she had been want to do as a child.

“What’s the matter with Papa?”

Holton turned around. He had been so lost in thought that he had not heard little Matilda approaching her father’s door. She stood there, still in the nightgown that made her look like a little angel, hesitant on the precipice of her father’s doorway, watching the bustle of people within. It was a worrying sight for any child to see. Her father lay prone on the bed, his shirt unbuttoned, and cold towels pressed to his neck and forehead. Servants bustled around him, the steward was pulling off his boots, Mrs Bury was rubbing salve onto his chest, and the doctor sat, grave-faced, taking his pulse with his long, thin fingers.

“Is Papa dying?” Matilda demanded of the room. Holton stepped forward, taking her hand.

“Come away, little one,” he said softly. “Papa is only a little poorly. He shall be better soon.”

“I want to stay with Papa!” Matilda exclaimed, digging in her heels and resisting the pull of Holton’s hand.

“Oh, there now, duck!” Mrs Bury said, wiping her hands on her apron and crossing over to the little girl. “What is a little duck like you doing out of bed?”

The housekeeper swept the ten-year-old up into her arms with surprising strength for a woman of her age, and Matilda, worried and confused, instinctively clung to that mothering presence like a baby monkey.

“Holton here shall come and tell all when he’s heard from the doctor,”

Mrs Bury said, setting off down the corridor with her little mistress in her strong, working arms. "And we shall have a jam tart for breakfast!"

"Promise?" Matilda called to Holton, looking back over Mrs Bury's shoulder with wide eyes. "Promise you'll come!"

Holton put his hand across his heart and bowed, like a soldier.

"On my honour."

He was relieved to see his best friend's daughter's face split into a sweet smile before stepping inside Wynter's room and closing the door quietly. An air of calm had descended after the bustle of earlier. The doctor was checking his pupils by lifting his eyelids, frowning. He was preparing a diagnosis. It was best if as few people heard it as possible. That was the way in great families with no direct heir. One must always be careful about who heard what - when it came to the health of the patriarch. Holton's priority was to protect his master, and his master's child. He could not guarantee that everyone in the house shared his priorities.

"Thank you, girls," Holton nodded to them. "Go and sit with Lady Matilda, and send Mrs Bury back to me." He nodded to the steward too. "Go downstairs and see if the Cook has time to send up devilled eggs and bacon potatoes to the Adley's."

The servants obeyed him, wordlessly following orders.

"I shall listen to his heart now," the doctor said. "Help me remove his shirt."

The two men did so. Holton was surprised by the pale pallor of his master's skin; how clammy it was to the touch. The doctor placed his stethoscope to his ear and frowned.

"It is rapid," he said, solemnly. "We shall remove all he is wearing and put on a fresh, clean nightshirt."

"How bad is it, doctor?"

"It is not good." The doctor was Scottish and known for his honest

words and good sense. "It is certainly a fever of the more virulent sort. It would be wise to keep the child away from her father at all times, and sensible to only have one primary nursemaid by his side, just to prevent the spread of infection - no visitors."

Holton nodded. Matilda would be most upset, but perhaps the liberal application of Mrs Bury's jam tarts would help her temper. At least with only one nursemaid by his side, it would prevent Arabella from interfering. Holton could think of nothing worse for her brother's temper than exposure to his sister twittering on.

"He went riding last night, and rode through a storm," Holton said. "Might that be the cause?"

The doctor shrugged. "It could be, but then again, it could be a dormant illness resurfacing. His wife died of an ague, did she not?"

Holton nodded, reluctant to remember that terrible time. Wynter, who had struggled in his marriage to Lowenna, but nevertheless stayed by her side throughout her illness. He had been told at the time that an ague might be infectious to him, but he had not cared, too wrapped up in his own guilt about his lack of fidelity to his wife - to care for his own health, but now Holton wished he had insisted his master take better care. For Matilda's sake, if no one else. Holton would not allow that poor little girl to be made an orphan.

"What must we do?" Holton said.

The doctor sighed heavily. "He is not a young man."

"But he is fit and healthy!" Holton countered earnestly. "The Master will fight any disease powerfully."

"He will indeed, doctor," Mrs Bury added. "And I have Culpepper's Herbal to refer to, if it is for an ague, I can prepare black bilberry syrup, would it suit?"

"It should suit well," the doctor nodded. "Try to give it to him when he is in a sweat. I shall come again tomorrow to visit - perhaps bleed him if I think it necessary. I shall prepare a few drops of laudanum for him now, to help him sleep."

"Thank you, doctor," Holton said. "We shall follow your every

instruction.”

Suddenly, Wynter groaned, stirring in the bed and his eyes fluttering open.

“Barty?” he moaned.

“I am here, sir.” Holton sat on his master’s bed, reaching for his hot hands. “You must rest, sir, you have a fever.”

“Where - where is - Frances?” Wynter murmured, slowly thrashing his head. “Frances?”

Holton glanced up as Mrs Bury who looked down at her master with a worried expression.

“Take some medicine, sir.” Holton held his master steady as the doctor dropped a dose of laudanum under the tongue, and then Mrs Bury followed it up with a little water. Wynter sighed, sinking back, his face almost grey against the white linen. The doctor nodded, pleased.

“I only go to call on the Morrison’s now,” the doctor said. “I shall be close by if you have further concerns.”

“Thank you, doctor,” he said, holding open the door for him. The steward stood on the other side of the door, waiting for instructions and jumped to attention.

“Show the doctor out,” Holton commanded, then closed the door again with only himself and Mrs Bury inside.

“Who can we trust to nurse him?” Holton said frankly.

Mrs Bury chewed the inside of her lip thoughtfully. “If it were but a sniffle, I might say Leah for she’s a good enough girl - and she has herb knowledge, but she also does Lady Adley’s hair so ...”

Mrs Bury let her words drift off. It was unspoken in Sinclair Manor that Lady Arabella Adley was not to be trusted with matters that impacted the life of the estate. The idea that Holton, or Mrs Bury, would let anyone other than someone they truly trusted, know how sick the Duke of Sinclair was, was ridiculous. They would choose only

their most discreet servants and keep his interactions to an absolute minimum.

“I would do it myself,” Mrs Bury mused, “but it is hardly fitting, and someone shall have to play parent to the wee girl, and she’ll not attend her governess when she’s in such a state.”

Mrs Bury sighed, looking towards the form of her sleeping master, and then lowered her voice.

“I know it is not... well, proper, but Miss Frances? I’d trust her well enough to keep an eye on Lady Matilda, or to nurse him well. Besides -,” Mrs Bury glanced at her Lord and whispered. “He cannot keep calling her name out with her not here - suppose it got out he were calling for her in his sickness?”

“There is also the fact that he seems to want her back, also,” Holton said, raising his eyebrows at Mrs Bury. “It might calm him to have her back in the house.”

“I should think so.”

The two managers of the house, Butler and housekeeper, stared at their Master, letting the plan settle between them.

“We’ll need a discreet girl for fetching and carrying,” Holton said. “If either myself, or you, or Miss Frances is in here - we should not leave him unattended, in case Matilda should sneak in.”

“Or Arabella,” Holton added darkly, “to berate him to death.”

“We’ll have Marie for that,” Mrs Bury said. “She’s a good girl, and very quiet, also she’s welsh so no one understands a word she says anyhow. She’ll do well.”

“Then it’s decided,” Holton said. “We tell no one it’s an ague, only a catching fever the doctor thinks will pass quickly.”

“Very good,” Mrs Bury nodded. “We shall have to send a boy post-haste to catch Miss Frances, before she changes at the post.”

“Indeed,” Holton said, looking toward his friend and remembering the

distant, plaintive tone in which he had cried out for Frances. "If I have understood things rightly, I think she will be eager to return."

Chapter Fifteen

“*M*iss Fortescue! Wait!”

Frances turned to the sound of her name being called. She had only stopped at the post briefly to change horses; she planned to simply stretch her legs in the yard and then continue as quickly as possible. No one knew she was travelling so early, only Ralph. Instinctively, she searched for his face among the hard-faced labourers and travelling folk who littered the horse yard. Then she saw Holton reigning Cobalt to a sudden stop, the horse’s hooves skidded a little in the gravel.

“Holton?” Frances asked, amazed. “What are you doing here? Did I forget something?”

“No, my lady.”

A sudden thought crossed Frances’ mind.

“Is this about... the finances?” she asked, lowering her voice carefully.

“No, it is not,” Holton gasped, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. He had clearly ridden fast and hard to catch her. “You must come back to Sinclair Manor with me, Miss Frances.”

“Of course.”

Frances didn’t question, even though her heart had dropped at his words. Something terrible must have happened, her mind was immediately full of visions of Ralph misfiring his shot gun, or Matilda being thrown from her horse again. She showed none of this panic on her face, however, and quickly turned to the horse-master.

“Please harness Cobalt here and give him a drink. He will pull the

carriage back to the manor.”

“Back to Sinclair Manor, my lady?”

“That’s correct,” Frances nodded. “Please be swift, we have an emergency. Holton and I will be over here. Please call us when you are ready.”

She led Holton over to a quiet patch of grass by a well, and turned to him with a worried face. “What happened? Is it Matilda? Did the pony throw her again?”

“No, my Lady, do not worry. Lady Wynter is safe.”

Holton took off his hat and wiped at the sweaty tendrils of hair on his brow. He had ridden harder than he had ever in his life, and even with all his efforts, using his master’s fastest horse, he had still only just caught her before the coach departed. He thanked the Gods for this miracle, that he wouldn’t have to pursue her all the way to her father’s estate. He couldn’t bear the thought of being away from his Master for much longer.

“It is His Grace.”

“Wynter?” Frances swallowed hard. “What happened?”

“He’s taken ill,” Holton shook his head. He still couldn’t reconcile how quickly his master had sickened. “He has an ague.”

Frances put a hand to her mouth, covering her trembling lips. She had sudden memories of being sent from her father’s house to play outside, of stern doctors and hurried servant’s footsteps towards her mother’s bedroom.

“Are you all right, Miss Frances?” Holton asked gently.

It doesn’t mean he’s going to die, she told herself firmly. You are not a child anymore; you can help this time.

“Yes,” her voice was small, and she folded her arms, holding herself tightly. “How bad is it?”

“The prognosis is... fragile,” Holton said. “He will need constant supervision.”

Holton looked up at her with pleading eyes. Frances could see how desperately he loved his master, and how concerned he was about his sickness. Her heart squeezed at the depth of the emotion she saw there.

“You must forgive me for asking this of you, Miss Frances, but we are desperate.” Holton carried on, twirling his hat nervously in his hands. “When a man like my Master, with no apparent male heir, is taken ill like this - there can be much suspicion. We need to keep his true condition hidden from... the household until he recovered.”

From Arabella, Frances thought bitterly. She knew that woman wouldn’t hesitate to push her own horrible son forward to inherit Ralph’s estate if she caught even a whiff of danger.

“How can I help?” Frances asked gently.

“We need to have people around the Master whom he trusts, and who we can trust in.” Holton fiddled with the brim of his hat. “I know it is a lot to ask, and possibly quite improper, but there is nothing I won’t ask for His Grace-,”

“I will come with you,” Frances interrupted, and placed her hand on Holton’s leather gloved fingers. Holton looked instantly relieved that he had not had to beg her for her assistance. He didn’t know that from the moment he had spoken the words, she had been desperate to return to Ralph’s side.

“Of course, I will. I will help however I can.”

“I had hoped you might say that.” Holton smiled wearily. “You really are the best of ladies.”

“Thank you, Holton, but I do not do it for praise.” Frances looked back towards the carriage, wishing they would hurry. “In all truth, there is little you could do to keep me away.”

Stay alive, my love, her heart whispered. *Stay alive! I am coming!*

"I thought that might be the case," Holton spoke softly. "Lady Matilda is lucky in her friends."

"Yes," Frances echoed, not correcting him. "Lady Matilda. How is she faring?"

"She is very afraid," Holton sighed. "Your presence will be great comfort to her, I am sure. Her own mother died of a similar ague."

Frances heart jolted. "Might it be connected? Was it a similar ague? Hot or wet?"

"The doctor is unsure; it is still too early to tell." Holton frowned. "You seem to know much about these medical matters, Miss Frances. Are you familiar with agues?"

"Very," Frances nodded grimly. "Like Lady Matilda, it was an ague that took my mother away from me."

"I am so sorry," Holton said, his heart going out for this beautiful girl with her distraught face and fierce eyes.

"Do not be, Holton." Frances looked at Holton with a determined gleam in her eye. "I do not plan to lose another person."

He could tell from looking at her that what she felt for his master was not some simple, young *débutantes* infatuation. Clearly, when Frances Fortescue fell in love, she fell in love with her whole being. What other explanation could there be for her tortured expression and flushed face? Holton had worked in service long enough to get the measure of a person's emotions within a few moments of meeting them. His suspicions had been correct, he deduced that Miss Frances had fallen in love with the Duke of Sinclair. What he hadn't reckoned with was how fiercely protective falling in love, made a woman like Frances.

"We are ready, Miss Fortescue!" the horse-master called.

"Then let's be away," Frances said, "and let us stop at the apothecary on the Sinclair estate, I have some items I need to pick up. Do not spare the horses!"

Holton watched in amazement as the eighteen-year-old woman marched back to the coach with all the determination of a warrior off to do battle. His heart was lightened. He felt his master's chances were greatly improved if he had Miss Frances Fortescue on his side.



Ralph was drifting in a fitful dream, somewhere between sleeping and waking. He was aware of someone laying a cooling cloth against his forehead, and that his chest was hot and tight, his throat was parched as if he was being dragged across the desert. He thought he saw his mother, long dead, spooning out a measure of barberry juice to give him with her smile soft and sweet. He might have even called her mother, have clung to her worn, soft hands and pressed them to his face, but he couldn't tell.

Then Lowenna came. She stood at the end of the bed, dressed in black, saying nothing even though he begged her to. She sat beside him on the bed, round with child as she had been when she carried Matilda inside her and gave him a pitying look. It was the same look she used to give him when he awoke in liquor. *Can you not behave yourself?* He heard her whisper in her sweet, sad tones. Then she was laid beside him, laid out in the gown she had been buried in, a beautiful violet dress and her skin was as yellow and blue as at had been on her dying day.

She turned her face to his, her neck cracking slowly and spoke through blue lips, *You never loved me. Who do you wish was in my place?*

Then he saw Frances lying next to him, Frances so close his hands could trace her soft skin. She was wearing the beautiful pearl gown she had worn on the night of Arabella's party, the night he had first seen her for what she truly was: remarkable. She rested her head on the pillow, looking up at him as warmly and openly, as if she was waking up in bed with him. Ralph couldn't help whispering her name. Then she was gone. The room was empty, apart from Mrs Bury and himself, and the bed beside him was bare. She'd left him again, his sweet Frances, a vision of his desire, gone too soon.

"No," Ralph moaned, his hands flailing in the empty air. "My love, come back to me!"

Lowenna watched above him, standing over the bed with a disappointed glare, her tears dripping blue ice onto the duvet.

You love her, Lowenna wept. Ralph thought he would drown in the tears. Water dripped down his brow, he was going to drown! Lowenna's tears kept falling.

"I'm sorry," Ralph had croaked, straining against invisible hands. "I'm sorry."

Then the door opened, and Frances stood there again, this time flushed and frantic, pushing her way into the room. She looked so beautiful, wearing the travelling clothes she had left in, and shining with a magical light. Ralph sighed against the brightness of it, murmuring her name.

"Don't go," he muttered, his eyes stinging, head pounding. He wanted to keep looking at her, but he was scared to lose this vision of her again.

"I won't."

Her voice was so close, so real - God how he wanted it to be real!

"My love," he murmured. "I wish you would come back."

"I'm here."

A cool hand, small and feminine, pressed against his face. His eyes flew open painfully and his head jerked back. Frances was there! He could feel the warm breath of her lips, the road dirt on her bonnet.

"Good God," he croaked. "You came back!"

She smiled tremulously, her eyes bright and watery.

"Yes, I did," She reached for her bonnet ribbons and tugged them undone, turning to a parcel beside her. "Mrs Bury, please unpack this, I know of a good tincture we can try to bring his fever down."

"You're real!"

Ralph felt like his heart was going to hammer out of his chest, but he knew he must be awake. His head pounded to begin with, and his eyes hurt in the light. He winced and squinted at her. If she was a dream, surely he wouldn't be in so much pain? He watched her pulling off her gloves and jacket, pulling her long hair back into a sensible ribbon.

"Christ alive, you really are real!" He began to shake, fear overtaking him. "You can't stay here, Frances, you - you must go - you must go now - if anyone should see you - what will they think?"

He tried to pull himself up, but it was like a carthorse was strapped to his back. Frances pushed him easily back down, unbuttoning her long sleeves and rolling them up.

"Let me and Holton worry about that," she said, pressing a blessedly cool cloth to his forehead and neck. It felt wondrous to have her gentle touch so close. "You try and rest."

"You cannot nurse me," he rasped, trying to catch her hand with his own shaking fingers. "It is not proper. You are... to be engaged."

"Only I decide what I will do, Wynter."

Her beautiful eyes were so fierce, and her little grip was so tight that Ralph felt a rushing wave of love threatening to carry him away.

"I'm staying. In your condition, there is very little you can do about it, so you must, as Matilda might say, like it or lump it."

She raised one, fair arched eyebrow at him and he smiled weakly.

"I like it," he whispered, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath.

"Try to sleep," whispered Frances' voice.

"What if you're a dream?" he murmured, lolling against the pillows.

"Then I'll be there when you sleep, too." He felt her slim fingers grasp his hand and hold it tight. "Don't worry, I'll be here. Sleep."

And he did, as quickly as if she had commanded him. It could have been moments later, or hours, but he was startled awake by a loud

banging. He groaned against the noise and rolled over, extending his hand towards where he thought he might find Frances' hand on the quilt, but she was gone.

"Frances?"

He felt tears sprouting in his eyes, irrational sobs building up inside him that he couldn't push away. She was gone again. She had been a dream and now the dream had disappeared. Then he heard voices as the door opened and Mrs Bury squeezed in, as if she was trying to keep something out. She looked worried and harassed and took a moment to compose herself before noticing his watchful eyes.

"You're awake Master."

She crossed to the chair beside the bed. That was when he noticed a bonnet hanging on the arm. He recognised it instantly. It could only be hers. Frances was here. His heart raced quickly, and he wiped his face on the sheet, trying to ignore the heaviness in his limbs and the jarring pain in his head.

"Where's Frances?" he croaked.

"Miss Fortescue is outside," Mrs Bury's eyes darted to his bedroom door. "She and Mr Holton are - uh - having a discussion with Lady Arabella."

Ralph thought he heard raised voices, but he was too tired, too heavy to really consider them. He closed his eyes for a moment and the next second he opened them to a room full of noise. He took in the scene like a man watching a play. Arabella stood in the open doorway, her hair loose in a tumbled frizz of blonde rage, shouting at Holton who barred her way into the room.

"I have a right to see my own brother!"

Her voice seemed distant to Ralph, as if she was shouting from far away. There was a ringing in his ears that was so bright and painful - it tasted sharp, like copper. He tried to swallow but his throat was too thick. Was this another fever dream? Was he dreaming his own death?

"The Duke is unwell, it is not sensible to expose other members of the household to his sickness," Holton said.

“Then why is she even in there?” Arabella demanded. “Why did she even come back?”

She gestured to Frances who stood at the end of Ralph’s bed, twisting her pretty fingers together.

“Miss Fortescue was specifically requested -,”

“I know what she’s after!” Arabella pointed at Frances angrily. “She’s after the Sinclair Fortune! I know she told you something meddlesome about my accounts, but it’s all lies I say!”

“My Lady, this is hardly the time!” Holton said, but Arabella wouldn’t be silenced. Ralph had never seen his sister so irate, he thought, not even when her husband had died.

“She’s a little gold-digger!” Arabella glared at Frances. “She’s got an agenda, and she’ll steal my boy’s inheritance right from under my nose!”

“Lady Adley, Miss Fortescue is here to help the Duke -,” Holton tried to respond.

“I’m here because he asked me to be here,” Frances interrupted.

Ralph watched her pull herself up to her full height and stand at the foot of his bed, as if she was preparing to fight off a pack of wolves for him. His heart swelled with tenderness.

“I’m here because he has been kind to me, and deserves my kindness in return, and because he asked me to - I honour the wishes of my friends.”

“Friends!” Arabella snorted, glaring at Frances. “I know your type, young lady. I’ll never forget what you’ve done here - I’ll tell everyone of your underhanded, money grubbing ways! Don’t think you’ll get away with it. This estate belongs to Philip, and Philip alone.”

“Actually, I think you’ll find it belongs to the Duke,” Frances answered coldly. “Who really needs some peace and quiet in order to recover, so I will have to kindly ask you to leave. Immediately!”

Frances' commandment rang around the room in the silence, but Frances held her ground, staring down his sister. Ralph noticed faintly how impressed Holton looked, but his eyes were starting to hurt from watching.

"Your days as a guest in this house are numbered, young lady," Arabella hissed. "Mark my words."

Arabella turned on her heel and left, Holton following and closing the door quietly behind him. Frances turned her beautiful face towards Ralph, her soft eyebrows pulled into a frown as she looked at him.

"Wynter," she said, softly coming back around to the side of the bed and sitting. "I'm sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep."

Ralph sighed and held out his palm to her, closing his eyes. He felt her cool little hand slip into his and was filled with a sense of completion.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you for coming back."



Frances awoke suddenly in the middle of the night, gasping from a bad dream. For a moment, she couldn't remember where she was. There was darkness all around her, except for a little pool of golden light from the candle. Then her eyes adjusted, and she remembered. She had sent Mrs Bury down to bed, saying she would watch Ralph through the night. She had wetted his brow in his fevers, given him some tincture she had picked up at the apothecary, along with some of Cook's broth which was a godsend. Finally, he had fallen into a heavy sleep when the doctor came and delivered a spoonful of laudanum to help him rest.

Frances heard Philip and Arabella detaining the doctor with questions outside of the door but hadn't concerned herself with them. Ralph was the most important thing, and she had watched him carefully, each rise and fall of his broad, manly chest - and each frown and twitch of his dark eyebrows and handsome face. She must have fallen asleep at his side. She stretched her arms gingerly, feeling the pull in her unused muscles and squinted over at the carriage clock on the mantelpiece. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning. It was far too late to go and wake Mrs Bury now. It was better that she just stayed through the night.

She rose quietly, trying not to wake Ralph, and turned to the window, shivering lightly against the chill of the dark room. Her mind drifted back over her dream. She had been running through a dark fog when she heard a splash and a shout, but she could not see its source. Then she had heard Ralph's voice shouting out, and Matilda crying, but she hadn't been able to find them, no matter how hard she searched.

"Where are you?" She had screamed into the mist. *"Where are you?"*

Frances groaned, resting her head against the cold glass of the window, her breath steaming it lightly. She tried to tell herself that all was well, that Matilda was safe, and Ralph was right here, in the room with her, but it didn't stop the pounding of her heart.

"Bad dream?"

She turned to the bed. Ralph's eyes were open and staring at her. He looked a little glassy, no doubt from the laudanum, and his pallor was still pale and yellowish, but he did seem quite alert.

"Yes," she admitted, running her fingers through her hair as she crossed back to the chair and sat down. "It was."

Ralph nodded, staring up at the canopy of the bed. "I have them, too."

"How are you feeling?" Frances asked.

"A little better, I think." He frowned, as if trying to ascertain his symptoms. "My head does not ache as much, and I think I can breathe a little easier. I do not feel as hot."

"Let's see."

She instinctively laid the back of her hand against his forehead to measure his temperature and, finding it to be cooler than usual, she unthinkingly moved her hand to rest over his heart, measuring his pulse. She smiled.

"Your pulse has slowed," she sighed, relieved, and for the first time noticed that she had her bare hand resting against the cloth of his nightshirt in a most improper manner. She quickly withdrew it, clearing her throat.

“Are you thirsty?” she asked, reaching for a glass of water. Ralph nodded and allowed her to tilt the glass to his lips and he drank eagerly.

“Thank you,” he gasped, falling back against the pillow, clearly exhausted from this small activity. Frances could see that whilst his fever might have broken, he still had a long way to go before he was back to full health.

“You should try and get some more sleep, Wynter,” she said softly, setting the glass back down and tucking the blanket around him tenderly. “This has been trying for you.”

“It looks like it has been trying for you, too.” Ralph gazed up at her. His hand lifted heavily, as if it took all his strength to do it, but he managed to brush a finger down her cheek. Frances smiled, relieved to feel his touch and suddenly her eyes stung with tears.

“Frances?” Ralph frowned up at her. “What is it?”

“I’m sorry,” Frances gasped, covering her eyes in embarrassment. “I’m so sorry, I just - for a moment, I really thought we might lose you, Wynter.”

“Frances,” his hand cupped her face and she blinked heavily, not wanting her tears to fall on him.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. “It’s been a long few days.”

“You shouldn’t have stayed; it’s been hard for you.” Ralph let his hand fall from her face and sighed. “I should have sent you away.”

“You tried.” Frances laughed lightly.

“I did?” Ralph looked up at her with a vaguely puzzled expression. “I don’t remember that.”

“You were quite fevered, Wynter,” Frances said kindly.

“Yes, I imagine I said very many foolish things.” Ralph blinked hard against the low light. “If I told you to go, why did you stay?”

“Because you asked for me.” Frances smiled at him.

“Stubborn girl,” Ralph whispered, fondly. “Frances, I want to say... after the last time we spoke ...,”

“No.” Frances shook her head, reaching out to take hold of Ralph’s hand again. “Please, let us not speak of those things now. I am here to care for you until you get better. We can discuss it when you are well.”

Frances could tell he was much too tired to argue with her, his head flopped back against the pillow.

“Let me get you some laudanum,” Frances whispered, reaching for the vials the doctor had left earlier in the day. She was expecting to find two vials, one half empty and one full, but could only find the half empty one. She supposed the doctor had taken it away with him, and carefully dropped a few brown drops into the water.

“Drink this,” she raised it to his lips. “You’ll sleep.”

“What about you?” Ralph murmured after sipping the liquid down.

“I’ll stay here.” She rubbed the back of his hand.

“Come here,” Ralph sighed, his eyelids clearly too heavy to hold up. He shuffled over gently, tugging her hand insistently until she was sitting on the bed beside him.

“Lie your head down,” he whispered, clearly on the edge of unconsciousness, unaware of what he was saying, or the inappropriateness of his suggestion.

“Shush,” Frances hushed, brushing his hair from his face. Yet, when she was sure his breathing had become regular and he had drifted off into a laudanum-soaked dream, she did indeed slowly, carefully, lie down beside him. She wouldn’t sleep, and she would rise as soon as Mrs Bury came to the door, no one would know that she had spent these small hours in the cold of the early morning, with her head on the pillow beside him, her hand resting on his chest, savouring each slow, precious beat of his steady heart.

Chapter Sixteen

“*L*et me take over, Miss,” Mrs Bury said at five in the morning when she came to check on her Master.

Frances, who had moved back into the chair, and away from Ralph’s warm body as soon as she heard footsteps approaching, nodded tiredly and rose.

“I shall go and lay my head down for a while.” Frances yawned, stretching her back. “But send a maid to fetch me when he wakes. I shall come back then.”

“Of course, Miss,” Mrs Bury bobbed into a curtsy. “I’ve had all your trunk placed in the guest room beside the master’s room, for convenience. I thought you would not want to go back to your old bedroom - it is so far on the other side of the house.”

Frances nodded, smiling. “You did well, Mrs Bury. I should prefer to be closer in case Lord Wynter needs anything.”

“How does he fare?”

Mrs Bury placed a loving hand on her master’s brow, as tenderly as she would have done for a small boy. Frances smiled to see the love and commitment in the old housekeeper’s face. She cared for her master as if he was her own child.

“I think his fever has broken,” Frances said, and Mrs Bury’s face was filled with relief. “I gave him a little laudanum in the night to help him sleep. Hopefully when he wakes, he will feel a little better for a long rest.”

“God bless you, Miss,” said Mrs Bury fervently. “You were truly sent

by angels to guard him. Why, you've been back two whole nights and you've not properly slept or had a change of clothes! You must go and care for yourself now. Go on!"

Mrs Bury chivvied her towards the door and Frances smiled at the worrisome, caring woman. They had become as thick as thieves in the last two days, rotating regularly between caring for Ralph and caring for Matilda, though. In truth, Frances seemed only to be away from Wynter when he was in deepest slumber, for otherwise he was only soothed in fever by her presence and holding her hand.

Holton dropped in regularly for updates but could never stay long. In the absence of her father, Matilda was demanding to either constantly be in the presence of the closest thing to parents she had in the household, Mrs Bury or himself, so he was run off his feet between comforting her and continuing to run the business of the house. As a triad, they were all equally dedicated to stopping Arabella from coming within arm's reach of Wynter again.

"Of course, I will obey." Frances laughed softly at the friendly housekeep, squeezing her hand affectionately. "But wake me when he wakes, Mrs Bury. I shall hold you to it."

"I swear it, Miss." Mrs Bury nodded. "After all, yours shall likely be the first face he asks for."

Frances' heart skipped a beat at her words, but she tried to appear as if they had no effect. She nodded solemnly and left the room, surprised when she carefully closed the door to see the sulking form of Philip lingering in the hallway.

"Lord Adley!" she gasped, pressing her hand to her chest. "You startled me!"

"How is he?" Philip asked, giving no apology for skulking outside the room.

Frances hesitated. Holton had been very clear with her that Ralph's condition should be kept as quiet as possible. However, Philip would certainly see if she lied and it did not harm, surely, to tell him that his uncle was recovering? The danger had been in Arabella somehow spreading the rumour that the Duke was dying - such gossip would wreak havoc upon the family investments.

“He is on the mend,” Frances said vaguely. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Lord Adley, I must go and change my gown.”

“Indeed.” Philip sniffed, looking her up and down derisively. “Lord, to think that you were considered the belle of the ball! Look at you now. He’s reduced you to nothing more than a mere servant.”

Frances flushed angrily and glared at him.

“If it is considered servitude to be called upon in the duty of a friend, then I shall welcome it!” she said. “His trust means more to me than life.”

Philip shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“Mother said you were out for my uncle’s money, but I see you are nothing more than a fool,” he said. “A foolish girl in love with a man who will never have her. You had best go home to your poor, foolish Father than stay here. There’s nothing for you.”

Philip laughed cruelly at her expression, leaning in closer to whisper vehemently, “Do you think a lowly country squire’s daughter, embroiled in debt, could possibly compare to his late wife? The Duchess was an heiress, Miss Fortescue, and what do you have?”

His bloodshot eyes raked over her body; her ruffled hair from lack of sleep, the stains of medicine on her dress.

“Just a pretty face and whores’ tricks,” Philip hissed, and Frances flinched. “They’re not enough, dear girl. You are far out matched. Pack up your little fantasy and go home.”

Frances felt her blood run cold and tears prick in the corners of her eyes at such vile, such horrible accusations, but she would not let Philip get the best of her.

“I have good manners, at least,” Frances said coolly. “And his friendship, which is more than I dared ask for. Now if you’ll excuse me -,” she inclined her head and pushed past him. “I must be on my way.”

She walked the few paces to the next bedroom and opened the door,

turning haughtily to look back at Philip. He looked askance, staring between the door and the proximity of his uncle's room.

"He - he put you in -?" he spluttered.

"He desired me to be close by," Frances said sweetly. "Good morning, Lord Adley."

She closed the door sharply in his face but felt no victory or relief. Instead, she pressed her ear against it, listening to the hallway. She expected to hear him retreating but instead she heard two sets of footsteps, and whispered conversation rushing past the door and away down the stairs. She sighed heavily. Arabella, of course. She had suspected that Philip alone could never have come up with such imaginative, painful insults - those were the work of his mother, who had sent her son in to do her dirty work - to try to rattle her Frances' resolve.

Frances dropped her head against the door and closed her eyes in frustration. The woman was like a bull terrier with a grudge, and now Frances was in her crosshairs, she knew that she was doomed. For a moment, Frances wished she had never told Holton about her suspicions with the accounts and just kept it all to herself, but then she shook herself, stepping back from the door decisively. She knew she had done the right thing, for Ralph, for Matilda, and ultimately, for every person on the Sinclair estate. Arabella's behaviour only made it certain that she was embezzling her brother, and Frances could not let herself be intimidated out of her conviction, even if Arabella's words cut her to the quick and ran across her mind like racing dogs. *She's a little gold-digger! I know your type, young lady. I'll never forget what you've done here - I'll tell everyone of your underhand, money grubbing ways!*

Frances pressed her fingers to her forehead, trying to massage away the ache of tiredness that lay there. She couldn't help but imagine what Arabella might say about her, what she might have already said. Suppose that Arabella had already written letters to prominent members of the Ton? What if she had already spread the message far and wide - that Frances was inappropriately close with the Duke? Anxiety mounting, she imagined the words on the paper, the gossip spreading like wildfire:

Miss Fortescue forced herself into my household and took advantage of my

brother's frailties to insert herself into his good graces ...

Frances groaned, sitting heavily on the bed, her head in her hands. Her mind turning to more depressing conclusions, she wondered how long it would be before dear old Amelia came out of the woodwork, flush with her victory over Frances, to contribute to the gossip and reveal Frances' intentions in coming to Sinclair Manor? She imagined Amelia, red in the face with excitement, gossiping over tea. *She swore she would have him, she said she would do anything to make him hers - in order to save her family from disgrace. She only wanted him for his money*

...

Frances flopped back, rolling on her front to push her face into the pillow and let out a loud groan, silenced by cotton and feather. How long would it be then for Lord Hart to withdraw his advances? How long would it be then before shame was brought to her father, to Matilda, to Holton, and to Ralph? Frances' heart clenched at the thought.

Stop it! She told herself firmly. *He asked to you stay and you did. You love him. What else could you have done?*

Nothing, Frances realised. If given the choice she would do it again, whatever the cost, even if the cost was that Arabella ruined her reputation. She imagined painfully how Ralph would react to such gossip. How would he look at her if he knew she only approached him for financial reasons? How would their friendship change, if he knew she had sought him out of pride, first? She tried to imagine what she might say, what could she say to assuage him, but she knew nothing would do it.

Yet there was a chance none of this would happen. Ralph would get well and be grateful, she would leave Sinclair Manor and there would be nothing more to say about it. Ralph would never let Arabella tarnish her reputation if she helped him survive a fever. Everything would be as they had planned. She would go and marry Lord Hart, and he would stay here, with Matilda, and live. Just knowing he was alive in the world would be enough for her, Frances decided, especially when she knew how close she had come to losing him. He would never need know of how she had used him poorly at the beginning.

Still, it weighed her down, like a heavy burden, Arabella's words

churning like butter in her mind. Finally, she could bear it no more. She rose, agitated, full of purpose, and pulled her journal from her travelling bag. She reached for pen and, foregoing sleep and rest, set it to the page. She must unburden herself, and even if these words could never be said to him out loud, she felt the need to confess the truth. Taking a deep breath and dashing a tear from her eye, she began to write.

My dearest love, Ralph, Wynter, Duke of my heart, there is much you don't know about me



“Miss?” There was a tap at the door and Marie, the welsh maid, stuck her head in. “His Grace is awake and is asking for you.”

“Thank you, Marie.” Frances lifted her hair away from her neck. “Could you possibly do these last buttons for me?”

“Yes, Miss.” Marie smoothed the shoulders of Frances clean gown and smiled at her. “It is a pretty gown, miss.”

“Thank you.”

Frances had chosen something practical and simple, her oldest and most worn day dress in a simple cream poplin with a repeating pattern of burgundy flowers.

“If you please, Miss, Lady Matilda is outside and she begs to speak with you,” Marie said.

“Of course!” Frances quickly checked her hair in the glass, noticed the tired bags under her eyes, and dismissed them, turning as Matilda was led into the room.

“Franny!” Matilda cried, rushing to embrace her. “How is Papa? Can I see him?”

“Not yet, Tilly.” Frances disentangled herself from the little girl, and smiled at her softly. “He is still very poorly. But shall we go to his door together and I shall give him a special message from you?”

“Oh, yes please!” Matilda jumped, clapping her hands together. “I should like that more than anything!”

“Come then.” Frances held Matilda’s hand and together they stepped out into the hallway. Philip was there again, lounging against the wall and looking petulant.

“Oh, so the little daughter can go and see him, but my mother and I still cannot?” he demanded of Frances.

“No, Lady Wynter is not permitted inside.” Frances glared at him. “She simply wants to give her father a message. In private, if you please, Lord Adley.”

Frances looked pointedly towards the stairs, Philip huffed in frustration, disappearing sullenly down the hallway. Frances waited until she was sure that he had disappeared before bending down so that she was eye level with Matilda.

“What is it you want to tell him?” Frances whispered.

“That I love him,” Matilda whispered back, shyly. “And I wish he would get better, so he could come and see the painting I have done for him.”

“I will tell him that.” Frances smiled and tucked a curl of Matilda’s dark hair behind her ear. “Anything else?”

“Please give him this.” Matilda gave Frances a quick peck on the cheek, then stood back, grinning widely as if very pleased with herself. “You promised you would give my message!”

“You are far too clever, Lady Wynter.” Frances shook her head at the canny child in mock exasperation. “Now hurry back to the nursery, or I shall send Mrs Bury after you with a spoon of black medicine!”

Matilda squealed in mock fear and laughter, and ran down the hallway, turning at the corner to call back, “Remember! You promised!” Before disappearing in a fit of flying ribbons and giggles. France rose, chuckling at the child’s impertinence, and entered the bedroom.

“Good morning, Wynter.” She smiled.

Her heart was glad to see him sitting up in bed, his back supported by pillows, and his eyes clear and alert. Mrs Bury looked up from the book she had been reading him and smiled at Frances.

“You were right, my dear,” she said. “The fever has broken. Doctor came this morning and confirmed it.”

“He was very pleased.” He smiled at her gently. “Said a good night’s sleep had done a world of wonder.”

Frances flushed at the message underneath his words; he had slept well because of her presence.

“Why he’s even asked for a cup of tea this morning!” Mrs Bury said pleased. “Once His Grace has his strength back up, I dare say he shall be as right as rain.”

“I am very glad of it,” Frances said, stepping closer to the bed. “Lady Wynter will be also. She had been worried for you.”

“I shall go and check on the lass,” Mrs Bury rose, smiling down at her master. “Now that you are in Miss Frances’ capable hands.”

“Thank you, Mrs Bury,” he said, sitting up a little straighter as Frances took her place in the seat beside him.

“I have a message from your daughter,” she said.

“Oh yes?” Ralph’s eyes twinkled and she could see his good humour was returning. “Has the little troublemaker run amok since I have been abed?”

“She is certainly keeping Holton on his toes!” Frances laughed. “But she wanted you to know that she hopes you get better soon, and that she loves you.”

Ralph’s face softened. “My sweet little girl.”

“She also gave me something to give to you,” Frances said blushing. “A kiss on the cheek. However, I think that gift is best given by Lady

Matilda herself.”

“Do you?” Ralph smiled, resting his head gently against the pillow. “I assume Lady Matilda insisted you were the giver of this gift, however?”

Frances swallowed hard. “She did.”

“And she made you swear duplicity?”

“She did.” Frances laughed and shook her head. “You know how she can be. I did promise.”

“Then far be it from me to make you a liar, Frances.” His voice was very soft, like falling snow, but the words burnt her all the way down to her soul. She felt as if her throat was constricting and she might not be able to breathe.

“Wynter,” she whispered, “I do not think -,”

“You promised.”

His smile was slow, open, but also a little wicked. Frances felt a shift in the air between them. When she had left, he had been the one who was stopping them, exercising control, holding back, now it felt like their roles had reversed. She didn’t understand why, but she felt suddenly afraid. His hand had found hers on the blanket and was squeezing gently.

“I did,” she whispered. “So....”

She leaned forward, intending to move quickly, and pressed a fast kiss to his cheek but as she moved to pull away his hand snaked around the back of her neck, holding her close. Their eyes met, and Frances felt as if her desire, her fear, her incredible, bursting love was all on display to him. She held her breath, unable to move.

“Frances,” he whispered. “My sweet Frances.”

My sweet Frances. The last time Frances had heard those words was when his lips had been against her throat in the library and she had been gasping for air, arched against him, as lewd and wanton as a

siren, desperate for his caresses and kisses. The words chimed a low chord deep inside her and she pulled away from his grasp, coughing and looking away.

“I - I - shall go and check on your tea,” she said, stumbling up, trying to calm her thundering heart. “I’ll be right back, Wynter.”

She fled the room, closing the door quickly behind her, pressing her hand to her trembling chest. What was she afraid of? She had dreamt of little else than his touch and his kisses, since she had returned to the manor. Now she saw that wonderful expression his eyes, the fire of passion and devotion, she felt herself shrinking away from its exposing glare. Why?

I’m not worthy of it, Frances thought to herself, Arabella’s right about me, I could never be worthy of him.

She stood for a moment, gathering herself and her resolve, trying to suppress the urge to weep and wail. Instead, she bit down on her lip, straightened her back, and told herself over and over that if she loved him, she would continue to do what was right for him. Right now, that was as simple as fetching a cup of tea. That was something she could do. She would worry about everything else, about the look in his golden-brown eyes - the way the touch of his hand on her neck sent a thrill down her legs that made her knees weak - later.

She walked down to the kitchen, expecting to hear the bustle of the Cook and the kitchen workers as she approached, but instead she was met only with the furtive sounds of a person moving as quietly as possible about the kitchen. Curiously, she pushed open the kitchen door. Arabella stood there, all alone, and holding it up to the light to assess its brown, liquid contents. She held the missing vial of laudanum. In her other hand she held Ralph’s cup of tea.

Chapter Seventeen

Frances couldn't help the gasp that escaped her lips and Arabella turned, catching sight of her in the doorway. Frances tried to smile.

"Good morning, Arabella."

"Frances," Arabella sneered, turning away from the door quickly. "What do you want?"

Frances stared at Ralph's sister. She stood alone in the kitchen, Ralph's tea tray in front of her, the vial of laudanum clearly having been secreted away up her sleeve or into her pocket. Frances felt like her brain was moving at an impossibly slow pace and for a moment, she thought that Arabella must only be trying help Ralph heal from his fever - and might have misjudged the medicine, but then she saw the way Arabella's eyes flitted quickly between Frances - and the cup of tea. She had stolen the vial of laudanum from the doctor and intended to pour the whole measure into her brother's tea. It was enough for a lethal dose. The truth of it settled like ice in Frances lungs.

"I said, what are you doing here?" Arabella repeated. "Shouldn't you be waiting on my brother?"

"I - I'm here for the Duke's tea," Frances swallowed. She wondered how Arabella had managed to get all the kitchen staff to leave. Had she sent them away on some errand, or made up and excuse?

"Where is everybody?" she asked, looking around.

"What business is it of yours, how our household is run?" Arabella frowned.

“Oh, it is only that the Duke requested more of Cook’s chicken broth,” Frances lied quickly.

“Well, he shall have to be patient.” Arabella gestured to the back door - which was open. “It is Sunday. The household has gone to Church.”

“Oh?”

“My, my,” Arabella smiled cruelly. “Quite the little heathen, aren’t you? Not only trying your hand at my brother’s suit, but also forgetting the day of the Lord?”

“Forgive me,” Frances said. “I - I haven’t slept, much.”

“No, I suppose you haven’t,” Arabella sneered.

“And - and has the entire household gone?” Frances asked, trying to discern who was still in the manor. She needed to get help, she needed to foil Arabella’s plan, but she had no idea how to do that. She knew if Arabella suspected that she had seen her poison the tea, she might do something drastic. Frances thought her best option was to play dumb, and then, offer to take the tea for Arabella. Then Ralph would be safe, at least for now, and she could tell Holton about Arabella’s acquisition of the drug.

“Everyone except the immediate family, and Holton, and Mrs Bury,” Arabella answered. “Oh, and you, of course, Frances,” she added, in a syrupy voice, “though I will admit one struggles to know exactly why you are here...”

“I’m - I’m a family friend, Arabella.” Frances stepped forward, reaching out her arms for the tea tray. “Let me take this up to Wynter, I am going back up anyway.”

For a moment, Frances thought she had got away with it, but then Arabella’s eyes narrowed, and she slapped a hand down on the table between Frances and the tea tray.

“Wynter, is it?” She mused, her cat-like eyes never leaving Frances’ face. “Hmm. No, I don’t believe I will let you take the tray.”

“It is no trouble.” Frances tried to make a grab for it, but Arabella slid

the tray away out of her reach and smiled again.

“Oh, oh, I see,” she said softly, long fingernails tapping the table. “You are a loyal pet, aren’t you? Did you see something suspicious? Do you think you’ve interrupted my secret plans, just like you exposed my accounts?”

Frances stared at the woman, wondering if Arabella was starting to lose her mind a little. What would possess her to try and kill him?

“Please, Arabella,” Frances said in a quiet voice. “Please. Give me the tea tray.”

Arabella shook her head, starting to laugh softly.

“You’re really trying to protect him?” She widened her sharp eyes. “You should be trying to protect yourself, Frances!”

Frances stared at Arabella, noticing the flush in her pale cheeks and her heaving bosom. Her eyes were flashing dangerously, and Frances was suddenly afraid of her. She knew instinctively that now she couldn’t let Arabella leave the kitchen with the dangerous drug in her possession.

“What do you mean?” Frances asked shakily.

Arabella through her head back in a sharp cackle of laughter.

“My, you really are a foolish little girl!” She grinned meanly. “Who is the one who has had access to the medicine the doctor provided? Who is the little pet who is known for bringing him his tea?”

“Me?” Frances swallowed hard, recognising for the first time the great betrayal that Arabella had planned. “You - you were going to suggest I had poisoned him?”

“Who said anything about poison?” Arabella said, quickly. “Are you accusing me of something?”

Frances swallowed heavily. She had to keep Arabella in the kitchen, she had to stop her taking the deadly laudanum out of Frances’ sight and destroying it, or worst, secreting it away to poison Ralph at

another time. All she could hope to do was to keep Arabella talking until Holton or Mrs Bury came looking for her.

“Why do you want to bring scorn upon me, Arabella?” Frances asked, diverting Arabella’s question, hoping to draw her into a conversation. Arabella loved to fire insults and give a young woman a verbal dressing down. Frances just had to give her an open opportunity - and hope Arabella’s appetite for humiliation was whetted. Her face twisted into a mask of hatred and fury and Frances knew she had achieved her goal.

“Because you deserve it!” she hissed, pushing her hands on the table. Frances noticed a sharp click as she set her left hand on the wooden bench and knew that Arabella must have hidden the laudanum in her sleeve.

“What have I done to deserve it?” Frances asked, trying to think about how she could possibly get the laudanum away from Arabella without physically wrestling it from her. She glanced around her, trying to discern if there was anything she might use to becalm or allay Arabella, but aside from hitting her over the head with a saucepan, she didn’t have any ideas.

“What have you done?” Arabella snarled. “You dare ask me that! I know you put Holton onto my accounts -,”

“There were discrepancies -,”

“My brother is mean with his allowance!” Arabella shouted, cutting across Frances’ words, spittle flying from her mouth. “Do you know how reduced I became, once my husband died?”

“It must have been terribly difficult,” Frances said, trying to speak calmly.

“I had complete control of the finances in my marriage, it was the only good thing about being married to that old, disagreeable toad.” Arabella ground her teeth. “Then, when he died, I thought I would be free, but my brother keeps me tethered like a dog! Whilst his foolish wife lived, he refused to let me stay here, in my rightful home, and even when she passed nothing was as it should be!”

“You loved your home,” Frances said placatingly. She glanced quickly

to the doorway, but it was empty and there were no sounds of footsteps in the hallway. *Where was Holton?*

"I did love it." Arabella glared upwards, as if the very stones of the house offended her. "I did love it, and I wanted to be instated in my rightful place as Mistress, as I always should have been -,"

"But your brother was always the heir," Frances couldn't help but interrupt.

"I was older than him!" Arabella shrieked. "By ten years! I was a help mate to my father, after my mother died, no one knew more about Sinclair business than me! All he did was be born a boy!"

Frances could see that Arabella had been harbouring resentment towards her younger brother, and family heir, for all of Ralph's life. She could see that Arabella had a keen sense of what she was owed in this life and felt that Ralph's birth had denied her of what she most wanted: complete control of the Sinclair fortune.

"Ralph treated me like a dependent," Arabella sneered. "He acted like I was charity and treated me with condescension. The idea of a regulated allowance is so insulting that I -"

"That you began to lie about your charitable foundations," Frances supplied.

"Yes,." Arabella's eyes gleamed and Frances saw that the woman was absurdly proud of her deviousness. "How else could I provide for myself, and my son? It was not greed, it was necessity!"

Frances could see that even though this was a tremendous lie, Arabella believed it to be true. She was absolutely convinced that she was forced to steal from her brother, and completely justified in doing so.

"Everything was going well," Arabella continued. "Everything was perfect, and then you had to stick your little, over-educated nose into my affairs! You found my account book, didn't you?"

"I - I noticed a discrepancy is all, I - I made note of it with Holton, I never expected -,"

“You little liar, you little viper!” Arabella screamed. “My book was moved, I know it! You saw my accounts - and went running to tell your little tales!”

“But - but Ralph would have understood!” Frances cried out, too surprised by Arabella’s mania to use his formal name. Arabella’s eyes widened in fury at the insubordination.

“Oh, *Ralph*, is it?” She screeched, “God, you have your little claws dug in deep, don’t you? But you don’t know my brother!”

“Of course, forgive me!”

Frances held up her hands in contrition. Though she did not feel sorry, she didn’t want Arabella to rush at her, or attack her.

“Do you know that he was a gambler? A womaniser?” Arabella sneered, clearly trying to hurt Frances. “He’s gone through girls like you, more than you can count over the years! You presume to know him? He would never have forgiven me!”

“But you did nothing... wrong,” Frances whispered, trying to appease her.

“Do you think that matters to him? Mr high and mighty and good morals?” Arabella snorted derisively. “Perhaps, before his wife died, he might have turned a blind eye, or even encouraged reckless spending, but once Lowenna was gone he transformed -,” She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Became so sincere, and so intense, always obsessed with his legacy and that daughter of his - it was like I didn’t exist!”

He became the man I love, Frances thought fondly, the man who has made me into a better woman.

“He would have forgiven you,” Frances whispered. “He will still forgive you, Arabella, he loves you.”

“You don’t understand,” Arabella laughed. “I don’t want his forgiveness! I am tired of begging and scraping before him. I want what I am due, what I have worked hard for all these years - the Sinclair fortune!”

“Arabella, no!”

Frances rushed forward and knocked the tea tray onto the floor with a crash. This was in part because she wanted to get Ralph’s tea as far away from Arabella as possible, but also because she was desperate to make a loud noise, to draw more attention to them. Arabella jumped back, staring at the broken crocks and the seeping tea on the floor. Upstairs, there was the sound of running footsteps. Arabella looked at her wide eyes and Frances quickly stepped in front of the doorway.

“Move out of the way!” Arabella ordered.

“No,” Frances shook her head and held out a trembling hand. “Not until you give me the vial of laudanum you have in your sleeve.”

The two women stared at one another in silence. Frances could hear the footsteps getting closer. Arabella’s face split into a sneering grin.

“He would have just gone to sleep,” Arabella spoke in a deadly, quiet tone. “No one would have suspected. I’ve been adding poisons to his tea for months to weaken him. But you came back! - And the doctor had laudanum - and it was an opportunity too good to miss! If they had looked, you would be the likely suspect.”

Frances was horrified by the idea that Arabella had been poisoning Ralph for so long. She hoped she had never accidentally been part of it - she prayed that the poison had never been in one of the cups of tea she had brought him in the morning.

“Give it to me, Arabella!” Frances warned. “Now!”

“Never!” Arabella hissed like a cat, and then rushed towards Frances, hand raised to strike her. Frances was prepared and held her arms up to protect herself from Arabella’s blows, but also wriggled her arm to grip her left wrist, scrabbling for the vial in her sleeve.

“You’ve ruined everything!” Arabella screamed. “Let me go!”

“No!”

Frances heard the thundering of heavy boots down the hallway and then, suddenly, Holton’s large hands were dragging Arabella off,

kicking and screaming, pulling her back into the kitchen. Somehow, the constable was also there - and so was the doctor. Frances could not think why they would be there, or how Holton had known to call them to the scene but had no time to puzzle it out. She pressed herself against the kitchen wall, panting heavily.

"She has a vial of laudanum!" she gasped, pointing a shaking finger at Arabella. "She - she was going to use it to poison the Duke!"

"That girl is a liar!" Arabella snarled, writhing like a snake in Holton's grip. "How dare she accuse me of this?"

"It's in her sleeve, her left sleeve!" Frances said, staring wildly at the doctor. "It's - it's the one that is missing from the Duke's bedroom! You'll recognise it, doctor!"

"Aye, I told Holton when I arrived something must be amiss," the doctor frowned. "I knew Miss Fortescue would never prescribe such a large dose for a whole vial to be missing."

"Hand it over, Lady Adley," the constable commanded, holding out a hand.

"There is nothing to hand over!" Arabella shouted. "You take her word above mine? I am a Sinclair by blood! What is she?"

"It's - it's in her left sleeve," Frances whispered. "I saw it."

Holton nodded and clutched Lady Adley's arm, and the vial fell from her sleeve onto the hard stones of the floor where it smashed. The scent of laudanum filled the air. Arabella looked up at them all, her eyes filled with spite.

"He deserved it," she rasped angrily. "He deserves to die, and that little whore deserves to be blamed for it!"

Then, just as suddenly, it seemed like all the rage and fury went out of her, and she deflated in Holton's grip. It seemed to Frances that moments before she had been a raving, squalid animal thrashing for freedom and now she was docile, like a caged bird.

"This will be the only way I am ever free of his grip," Arabella said

bitterly. "Then so be it. At least I shall never answer to my brother again."

Frances stared at this woman, a woman who would rather go to prison and live out her life in shame and infamy - than be dependent on her loving, kind brother. Frances wondered what kind of twisted, awful mind she must have, to make such terrible judgement choices.

"I think that counts as a confession, Constable," Holton said softly. "You may take her up to your carriage now. You might wish to take her son along with you also."

"Philip had nothing to do with it," Arabella's haughty tone had returned, and she looked on them as if she were still the lady of the manor, and not a confessed criminal. "You'll find him still asleep, in bed. You may leave him alone."

"Wake him anyway," Holton said. "He must say goodbye."

The doctor nodded and left, and the constable took Arabella by the arm to lead her upstairs to the Maria coach that was waiting there. Holton watched them go and then turned to Frances.

"Are you well, Miss Frances?" He asked, gently. "Did she harm you in any way?"

"No, no she did not," Frances stared at him in amazement. "How - how could you possibly have known we might need a constable? Did you know that she planned to hurt him?"

"No, I did not." Holton shook his head and sighed. "But the doctor told me this morning that he thought it strange that a vial of laudanum was missing. He said he knew that you would never take it, or deliver such incorrect dosages, and he feared it had been stolen by a servant. I will admit, I had ... darker fears."

Holton sighed and looked down at the smashed crockery and the spilt tea, and the brown bitter smelling medicine splashed over the floor.

"Why did she do it?" Frances asked quietly.

"I do not know." Holton shook his head. "I fear she has become quite

deranged.”

Suddenly, they heard a great ruckus upstairs.

“What the -,”

Holton ran out of the kitchen. Frances gathering her last ounces of strength to run up after him. Philip was standing by the stairs, being restrained by several servants as his mother was taken out to the black carriage. Far above, on the landing, Frances saw that Ralph had managed to stand at the bannister, and watched the departure of his sister, propped up by his daughter on one side and his groom on the other. Messages moved fast in grand houses like this one. His face was blank and empty. His eyes flickered to Frances as she came into view, but then swept back to his sister. Someone, perhaps the doctor, had told him of her crimes against him. Frances saw the way his hand tightened on the shoulder of his daughter - whom Arabella had sought to make an orphan. Matilda's face was blanched white and she wept, heavily, pressing her face into her father's shirt sleeve.

“This is madness!” Philip shouted, pushing against the servant's shoulders to be let past. “My mother is innocent! She is the Lady Adley! You may not do this!”

His eyes fell on Frances as she walked into the hallway.

“It's all her fault!” he yelled, his eyes bulging out of his head. “That little witch has concocted some scheme against my family! Take her, she should be hanged!”

“Silence, Philip,” Arabella called in a very level tone. “There is nothing to be done now.”

Philip fell quiet, confounded by his mother's instructions. Everyone watched in silence to see what Arabella would do or say next. Surprisingly, Arabella turned to rest her eyes of Frances.

“Frances, be a dear and fetch my shawl from the parlour.” Arabella spoke as if Frances were still her companion, as if none of this were happening. “I shall be cold, in prison, I should think.”

Frances glanced up at Ralph instinctively, and even though he was very far away, she saw his slight nod. Arabella had noticed and looked

up into her brothers wan, pale face. Despite his illness, his eyes were still as intense and fierce as always. Arabella snorted and raised her voice, standing tall as if the constable had not put her hands in fetters.

“I fear I must depart, dear brother,” she called, her tone heavy with sarcasm. “Good day.”

Frances didn't wait to see Ralph's response. She already knew he would say nothing. She rushed into the parlour, snatched up Arabella's gold and cream shawl, and rushed out of the front door to catch her as she walked to the police vehicle.

“Hold,” Arabella commanded, as if the constable escorting her was nothing more than a groom. The constable obliged with a frown, nodding for Frances to move forward and tuck the shawl around Arabella's shoulders. Frances tried not to look into her eyes, as she did so, but she could not help it. Arabella's hard, emerald eyes bored into hers.

“Why did you do it?” Frances asked, unable to stop herself.

“Dear Frances, you know the answer to your question already.” Arabella smiled in a belittling manner. “You are just like me, aren't you? I did not deserve poverty. I did not desire it. I wanted good things for my life - and was determined to have them. If Philip inherited Sinclair, it would have been just as if I had inherited it myself. I would have had everything I needed and been quite comfortable. See?”

Arabella lowered her voice to a secret whisper. “You're just like me. And you have won. Well done.”

In the instant of leaning close to whisper, Frances had not noticed that Arabella had pulled the shawl down into her hands. In a sudden movement, Arabella had tossed the shawl around Frances neck and was pulling it tight. Frances gasped, grappling against the tight fabric around her neck as the Constable shouted for help, trying to pull Arabella away.

“You think you're better than me?” Arabella shouted in Frances' face as she scratched hopelessly at Arabella's firm grip. “You're not better than me!”

Arabella's face was swimming in front of Frances' eyes, her vision failing her as she struggled for breath. Tears were pouring down her cheeks, she felt her knees weakening, even as she saw Holton running towards her.

Oh God, am I really like her? Frances thought dizzily as the sound of Arabella's insults faded. *Am I capable of the same selfishness, the same cruelty as she? Am I going to die without asking his forgiveness?*

"Get off her!" Holton shouted, and Frances felt blessed relief as his strong hands pulled Arabella away, and the scarf around her neck loosened. She slumped to her knees, coughing and shaking, breathing in sweet, life-giving oxygen - before she passed out.

I shall have to leave him, Frances thought, *I am not worthy of him and I would rather she had killed me, than have her see that I was as bad a woman as she!*

Chapter Eighteen

“*F*rances!”

“No sir!” Holton had cried when Ralph lurched forward and nodded to the groom to hold him back.

“Let me go!” Ralph growled. “Frances!” he shouted down the stairs.

“Take care of your daughter, sir!” Holton shouted over his shoulder as he ran forward to take Arabella from Frances. Ralph looked down at his daughter, whose face looked tortured.

“What’s Aunt Arabella doing?” she screamed. Ralph’s heart hurt to see her panic.

“It’s alright, my sweetheart,”

He held Matilda’s hand and looked helplessly on as Holton swept the collapsed Frances up into his arms and carried her back into the house, calling for Marie to prepare her bedchamber.

“Is she breathing?” Ralph shouted down to Holton, his heart thundering.

“Yes, sir!” Holton called, beginning to take the stairs. “She is just out cold!”

“Franny!” Matilda called out beside Ralph, pushing her arms through the bannister and a sob escaping her lips. “What did Auntie do to Franny?”

“Shush, darling, don’t worry,” Ralph said, even though he could

barely curb his own panic.

Matilda sobbed, fighting against her father's grip. "Is she dead? Is Franny dead?"

He pulled his daughter to his side, holding her tightly.

"Hush, little one," he said. "Look - she is only - only sleeping. Holton is carrying her upstairs. How is Miss Frances, Holton?"

Ralph called, trying to maintain a level of normalcy in his tone, despite the overwhelming need to rage at Arabella for her actions. Together, he and Matilda stared at Frances in Holton's arms. Her head hung loosely, and her hair, the red, tumbling curls bounced in the air. He was relieved to see however - that her chest still rose and fell easily.

"Has she fainted?" the doctor asked, bustling forward with his spectacles pressed to his nose.

"I think she ran out of air!" Holton panted as he reached the top the stairs.

"No, I think the poor lass has fainted from the shock!" He turned to Ralph. "You'll permit me to make an examination of the Miss Fortescue?"

"Of course." Ralph nodded, his heart racing. "Whatever you think is best, Doctor."

Ralph held Matilda tightly as Holton moved past, the doctor in tow, to the room beside his where Frances had clearly been staying. Matilda tried to break free of his grasp, but he held her as tightly as he could, despite the enduring weakness he felt in his legs. Matilda struggled, and then looked up at him with red eyes and a sticky nose.

"I want to be with Franny!" Matilda sniffled, her sobs turning to hiccups.

"Miss Frances needs to rest, dear heart," Ralph said. He stroked his daughter's cheek affectionately. Strands of her hair were stuck to her face. She needed to calm down, and rest, watching her Aunt get taken

away had been too much for her.

“Why don’t you go with Mrs Bury down to the kitchen for a warm glass of milk?” Ralph said, nudging her towards the housekeeper.

“Will you stay with her?” Matilda asked, her eyes still swimming with tears.

“Of course,” Ralph assured, kissing his daughter’s head. “Off you go.”

“Come on, little duck,” Mrs Bury said, stepping forward and taking Matilda’s hand. “Let’s get you a sweet to eat.”

Mollified with the idea of treats, Matilda went away with Mrs Bury willingly, leaving Ralph able to follow Holton and the doctor into Frances’ room. He hated that he was still so unsteady on his feet, but his mind felt strong again, but his body was still as feeble as a lamb, especially after the shock of watching his sister attack Frances.

“Is she alright?”

Ralph swallowed his anger as he saw the red mark around Frances’ neck - the beginning of a bruise from Arabella’s attempt to strangle her. He held his breath as the doctor ran his fingers over her throat, testing the sensitive skin.

“I cannot feel any permanent damage,” he said. “Though she may struggle to speak the next few days.”

Ralph felt a wave of relief so powerful he could have fallen over. He even swayed slightly, but a groom held him steady. He watched as the doctor opened a bottle of smelling salts and held it under Frances’ nose. She groaned and rolled onto her side, gasping for breath.

“Ralph?” she moaned.

Ralph’s heart leapt when she said his name, and Holton shot him a look, but everyone else in the room acted as if nothing had been said. The discreet doctor leaned forward, lifting Frances’ eyelids and speaking to her clearly.

“You have fainted, my Miss Fortescue. It is the shock. You must sleep

now, and when you wake up, have something soothing for the throat. It may hurt for a little while, but no major damage has been done.”

Frances nodded, her head already drooping back onto the pillow and fell immediately into slumber. The doctor smiled fondly.

“She is a strong young woman. No doubt she will recover quickly. The best thing we can do is let her sleep.” He nodded to the maid, Marie. “I am sure you can keep watch over her, Marie. If she wakes, make sure she has something to drink, a little cold tea or some wine, and if she has the stomach for it, perhaps some soup or jelly. Nothing solid, her throat may be irritated and bruised.”

“Of course, sir.”

Marie bobbed a curtsy and took up a protective position beside Frances, drawing the bed curtains around her to give her some privacy. The doctor turned to Ralph and assessed him critically.

“As for you,” he said, “the best thing you can do, Your Grace, is go straight back to bed.”

“I promised I would stay with her,” Ralph protested. “I am feeling quite well -,”

“You’re barely upright,” said the doctor lightly. “You’ve had a very dangerous fever. You’ve got over the worst of it, but you’re not quite out of the woods yet. Rest now, or you will regret your impatience tomorrow.”

“Come, Wynter.” Holton placed a hand on his master’s shoulder and spoke quietly so that only he could hear. “You know you must rest. She will be asleep for many hours yet. Come and lay your head down awhile. I shall call you when she rises.”

Ralph was reluctant but saw the sense in his friends’ words. Frances needed to rest and so did he.

“Very well,” he sighed, turning back to the door and gripping Holton’s arm to assist him as he walked. “Will you stay, doctor?”

“I shall,” the doctor nodded. “I shall check on the little Lady Wynter

and on the Lord Adley, to make sure everyone is well, and their nerves tended to.”

The doctor walked with them out of Frances’ room, Marie closing the door quietly behind them. He continued speaking as he saw his patient settled safely back into bed with Holton’s aid.

The doctor commented. “I am concerned about Lord Adley. He has already been drinking today, and I imagine this latest development with his mother might send him headfirst into the bottle.”

The family doctor was well-known for his frankness and honesty, and Ralph appreciated that he knew the details of the Sinclair inhabitants intimately. It was important to listen to the man’s commentary, and Ralph could see that Holton was certainly paying close attention.

“What will you do, sir?” Holton asked quietly as Ralph sat on top of the bed covers, and Holton removed his boots. He was only been wearing breeches and his shirt under his housecoat and was quite comfortable. Ralph sighed, thinking of his nephew, now alone in the world, without his mother to guide him. As much as he disliked the boy, as much as he thought him spoilt, he still had a duty towards him - just as he would still have a duty toward Arabella, however her prosecution progressed. These new responsibilities settled on his shoulders like an uncomfortable shroud.

“I shall settle his mother’s fortune on him,” Ralph sighed. “Let him have the house in Amsterdam. He’ll be free then to make his own life, his own mistakes. He is not a child and must live like a man.”

Ralph remembered his nephew’s dismissive attitude towards Frances, and towards Matilda too. He frowned.

“I shall see he is set up right,” he added. “But other than that, I shall have nothing more to do with him. Let him build his own house.”

“The responsibility shall be good for him.” The doctor nodded approvingly. “You will be doing him a great service, Your Grace. Shall he not, Mr Holton?”

“It shall be more than he needs,” Holton said quietly, standing by Ralph’s side. “And far more than he deserves.”

Ralph looked at him but didn't comment. His thoughts about his sister raced around his mind, but he did not have the words to share them. The doctor coughed carefully.

He walked to the door. "Rest now, Your Grace."

"Thank you, Doctor, I shall."

It was only when the door had closed, and the groom had left, when he was sure that he and Holton were completely alone - and would not be overheard, that he turned to his friend and said, honestly, "I should have listened to Frances when she first told me about Arabella," Ralph sighed. "I was fool."

"It is not foolish to place trust in your family, sir," Holton said, seating himself in the chair beside the bed that still had Frances' shawl draped over it.

"Exactly," Ralph muttered. "Precisely. I should have trusted her."

Holton raised his eyebrows at Ralph's words, and Ralph was too caught up in his own turbulent emotions to notice that he had accidentally confessed the true depth of his feelings to his butler.

Ralph carried on speaking, "Instead, I was blinded by my rank, by the status of my family."

Ralph sighed and dropped his head back against the carved wooden headboard, thinking about his long-lost mother, his father who had rested all his hopes upon his two surviving offspring.

"I turned my eyes away from what I knew to be true, that Frances would never lie to me, and that Arabella has been deceptive, ever since her husband died, maybe even before that."

Ralph closed his eyes against his own frustration. Their relationship had been isolating and lonely, and when their father died and then her husband, it had become even more so.

"I should have seen the signs."

"You couldn't have known, sir." Holton consoled him. "She was vapid

and self-concerned, but many women of society are, and yet they are not embezzlers or poisoners. Arabella chose this path herself.”

Ralph shook his head wearily. “Could I have stopped it? Could I have been more generous? Was I unfair?”

“No, Wynter!” Holton leaned closer, clapping a hand on his master’s arm and squeezing tightly. “You gave her a more than generous allowance, more than many other woman of her station. If she had asked for more, I believe you would have given that too, but from what I heard of what she said to Miss Frances -,”

“What did you hear?” Ralph’s stomach clenched when he thought of what horrible words Frances’ may have had to endure on top of the physical violence. Holton shook his head, gently, in refusal.

“I do not believe it is relevant,” Holton said. “Except that from I gleaned, I believe your sister would have never been satisfied, no matter the extent of your generosity.”

“But she is my sister, Barty. My sister, and she tried to kill two people today, one of them *me*.”

Ralph slipped into using his old friend’s first name, like they had done when they were boys playing together. He looked at him bleakly, saddened by memories.

“I adored Bella as a child, we both did,” he said. Holton nodded sadly. “How could it have come to this?”

Holton leaned back in the chair with a sigh. “Do you want my honest opinion? As a man who knew your sister from childhood?”

“Please.”

In his mind’s eye, Ralph could see his sister, young and frivolous - on the day of her wedding when she was just seventeen, with flowers in her hair. He would never have dreamed she held enough malice within her to desire his death.

“In truth, I believe that Lady Arabella was also jealous in nature,” Holton said forcefully. “Jealous of your position, jealous of your

fortune, but also jealous of you. She always wanted to be the only one by your side, the only focus of your resources and time. She was jealous of your wife's hold on you, of Lady Matilda's hold on you and now..." Holton paused. "Of Miss Frances' hold on you."

"She was threatened by Frances?" Ralph asked slowly, his mind turning.

"I believe so," Holton nodded. "It was not only the threat of the exposure of the accounts, that drove her to such extreme methods, it was also the threat that Miss Frances might... ascend in your expectations." Holton paused. "Perhaps ascend above her - to Lady of Sinclair Manor. She saw the way your feelings were moving, when you always wanted Miss Frances close to you in your sickness, and felt she had to act." Holton sighed. "She feared being displaced above all, she always had."

Ralph sat in silence, lost for words. He expected that his clever friend was quite right, but it was still astonishing. He laughed softly to himself, shaking his head.

"What is it, Your Grace?" Holton asked.

"It is only that I had no plans to 'displace' her."

Ralph smiled ruefully. No matter how much he desired to, he had not put into motion any plan to put Frances by his side, as Lady of the house, if anything, he had put into plan that did the opposite.

"Miss Frances is soon to be engaged elsewhere."

"Oh."

Holton said nothing for a moment and Ralph looked up at the canopy of the bed, embarrassed. The way Frances had said his name so intimately and gently in her sleep was secret knowledge between them. Ralph imagined he had also spoken similar words in his fever, also.

"I suppose it shall be Lord Hart, then?" Holton asked.

"It shall be."

Ralph tried to ignore the flush of anger he felt when Lord Hart's name was spoken.

"Well."

Ralph looked at Holton and could clearly see that his friend had something on his mind. He was tapping his foot agitatedly against the floor and drumming his fingers against the arms of his chair. His dark, handsome features were pulled into a frown.

"Come on, Barty, out with it!" Ralph barked. "I'm not getting any younger!"

"Well, I can only say that I think it a shame," Holton said carefully, glancing at Ralph out of the corner of his eye.

"Why should it be a shame?" Ralph asked. "What's wrong with Lord Hart?"

Despite everything that had happened that day, the revelations of Arabella's behaviour and Frances' collapse, Ralph still found himself hoping desperately that Holton would tell him why Frances should not marry Lord Hart.

It is not right, he admonished himself. She has been more than generous to you; can you not be generous towards him?

No, a deeper, more passionate voice responded. Damn him, I have given him my dearest love, why should I give him anything else?

"Nothing at all," Holton said quickly. "Lord Hart is, by all accounts, a fine man and will make a fine husband. It is only a shame because Miss Frances' heart clearly lies elsewhere."

"Oh?" Ralph looked nervously up and Holton, who stared back at him significantly. "Where do you think it lies?"

"I think you know, sir," Holton said levelly.

Ralph held his gaze for a moment and then broke off, breathing out heavily, letting himself flop against the pillows. He closed his eyes tightly, wishing that he felt stronger in his body, strong enough to sit

and watch Frances, and care for her. Strong enough to face his sister in person. Instead, he felt weak, and too tired to hide the truth. At least, to hide it from his friend.

“I do,” he admitted. “But she is misguided. It is not right; it is not appropriate that she give her heart to me.”

“Why, sir?”

“You know why. Lowenna.”

Ralph opened one eye and glared significantly at Holton. The truth that they both knew, all the arguments and unhappiness of his first marriage, sat between them accusingly. Holton sighed.

“I understand, sir. I shall leave you to rest now.”

“Thank you, Holton.”

Holton stood up slowly, looking down at his friend as if he was trying to find the best words for what he needed to say.

“I should say, sir,” Holton began. “That no matter what you think about where Miss Frances’ should place her affections, she is the most determined, most loyal young woman I have ever met. I do not think there is anything a man could do to change the course of her heart, once she has set upon it.”

Holton touched Ralph’s shoulder gently, and earnestly said, “I should think such a man would only be paving the way for his own sadness and turning away from great happiness.”

Ralph sat silently in the impact of his friend’s words. Then, too choked with emotion to speak, he simply nodded. Holton smiled gently and opened the door.

“Try and sleep, sir. You have a lot to think about.”



Ralph looked down at Frances’ sleeping face. Marie had dropped in that afternoon to tell him that she had woken, eaten a little and drunk

some more, and then dropped off back to sleep. After sleeping and resting himself for most of the day, Ralph decided to take his book to sit at her bedside with Marie.

However, he was not doing much reading. Instead, he watched Frances sleep. He found himself trying to discern the absolute colour of her hair, or marvel at the translucent, alabaster quality of her skin, how her blue veins ran so close to the surface at her wrists, and her throat. He longed to be closer to her, to climb onto the bed and hold her in his arms, but he could not. He had a fevered memory of rolling over in the night, heavy with laudanum, to feel her presence lying beside him. He had felt her hand stroking his hair, lulling her back to sleep.

When he woke truly that morning she had gone, and he thought it all a dream, until he noticed the indentation of another body in the bed beside him. In the night she had lain beside him, he was sure, and thought filled him with both tenderness and frustrated passion, that she had been so close and yet he had not touched and held her as he wanted to. He sighed heavily and Marie looked up at him. He checked himself.

Don't act like a mooning school-boy! He chided himself angrily. *But I almost lost her,* a small voice answered, pleadingly. *I could have lost her.* The thought filled him with icy dread, and he longed to reach for her hand to comfort himself. There was a light tap on the door and Matilda stuck her head around it, her eyes still red-rimmed from crying earlier in the day.

"Is Franny alright?" she whispered, staring at her sleeping friend.

"She is quite alright, poppet." Ralph slid his bookmark into place and beckoned for his daughter to come to him. "She is only sleeping, look."

Matilda scuttled over to him, and clambered up on his knee, pressing her cheek into his shirt and rubbing her face there, like a puppy nuzzling its mother. She had been more anxious of Frances' health than she had been of the loss of her aunt. On one hand, this saddened Ralph, but on the other it showed him what kind of impact his sister had left on his daughter. It was not positive.

"I don't want anything to happen to her," Matilda said tremulously.

“What could happen to her?” Ralph asked, stroking Matilda’s hair comfortingly.

“She could go away, like Mummy did,” Matilda whispered. “I don’t want her to.”

Ralph’s heart broke as he held his daughter close, fighting to find the right words. He was glad that the discreet Marie kept her eyes on her sewing.

“Matilda, your Mummy has gone to the angels, you know that,” he said hoarsely. “But Frances won’t do that. She is a young lady, and very healthy, she will be your friend for a long time.”

“And live here? With us?” Matilda looked up at him with guileless eyes. She had no idea what she was asking, but her question cut him to the quick. He thought of Holton’s earlier words, about where Frances’ heart lay. Did he dare ask for what he truly desired?

“Would you like that, sweetheart?” he murmured, tapping his daughter lightly on the nose. “For Frances to live with us?”

“Oh yes!” Matilda nodded enthusiastically. “She would teach me to jump the pony, and to paint, and you and her could have your long rides and talks together, the ones that make you smile so much -,”

Ralph was astonished at his daughter’s perceptiveness. Clearly, she had taken note of how Frances’ presence lightened his mood and brought him joy.

“- and I love her dearly, Papa,” Matilda finished. She twisted around to look up at her father, face full of hope. “Don’t you?”

Ralph’s heart answered quickly, but he was too aware of his audience to speak the words aloud. Instead, he kissed his daughter tenderly on the forehead and smiled.

“Why doesn’t Marie take you back to the nursery now, sweetheart?”

Matilda looked disappointed by this, but Marie was by her side quickly and Matilda acquiesced reluctantly. As the door closed behind them with a loud click, Frances stirred, her eyes fluttering open. She

saw his face and smiled.

“Wynter,” she said. Ralph’s heart swelled at her soft, illuminated face, but he wished she would call him by his first name, as she had done when she was barely conscious. “What - what time is it?” she murmured, stretching her arms above her head.

“It is coming on five o’clock in the afternoon.”

Ralph set his book on the nightstand and smiled down at her. He was glad that Matilda and Marie had now left, and he had these first moments alone with her. He reached out to hold her hand and was gratified when she squeezed it softly, almost automatically.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Well,” Frances said, her voice sleepy and croaky. She unconsciously reached up to rub her throat, no doubt trying to massage away the soreness she felt there. He saw a shadow of seriousness fall over her amber eyes.

“Arabella?” she asked fearfully. “Where is she?”

“Gone. She can’t hurt you anymore.”

He saw the flicker of relief across her face and felt a swell of rage that she had endured so much at the hands of Arabella. His fingers flexed against hers in anger. He could not forgive his sister for her behaviour against him, but even less for the way she had treated Frances.

“Holton says that he’s been able to prove her financial deviancy going back six years.” Ralph shook his head in dismay. “What you uncovered was only the surface of her scheme.”

“Oh, Wynter, I am so sorry,” Frances whispered, pityingly. “It is such a betrayal.”

“Yes.” Ralph blinked hard. Betrayal was only one word out of a million for everything he felt. He bit down on his lip, struggling to control his emotions.

“What is it?” Frances sat up, leaning closer. Pieces of her golden-red

curls fluttered forward over her face. "You can tell me, Wynter."

"I - I don't know how I should feel," Ralph spoke with difficulty, staring at her the bedclothes. "I seem to oscillate between rage and tremendous, engulfing sorrow. On the one hand, I remember my sister as she was once, the sweet young woman, and I feel I must help her but then I think of what she tried to do to you ... the rage is almost overwhelming."

Ralph looked up into Frances face, breathing hard.

"If she had harmed you seriously, Frances," he said hoarsely, "If she had taken you away from me -,"

"But she didn't," Frances interjected, shuffling to the edge of the bed so that they sat, knee to knee and hand to hand, gazing into each other's eyes. "We are both alive and that is all that matters."

"That is all that matters."

Ralph echoed the words dully, wondering how Frances could let go of her fear so readily. He couldn't imagine how frightening it must have been for her to feel Arabella strangling the life out of her. He knew he would never forget it, let alone forgive it, especially of himself. Frances had tried to warn him, and despite Holton's assurances, Ralph still felt responsible. He looked down at their joined hands, all the words he longed to say to her stuck in his throat.

"I never should have doubted you," he said finally, wishing he could express his gratitude more eloquently.

"It does not matter," Frances said earnestly.

"It does." Ralph shook his head. "How can a person be so entirely deceitful in who they truly are, the reality of their true feelings? The scope of it amazes me. I do not know how to forgive it. I shall never be so taken in again, so manipulated."

"I know you won't."

Her voice seemed strange as she said that, and Ralph noticed a strange flush in her cheeks and what almost seemed like sadness in her eyes.

She started to pull her hands away and he could feel her withdrawing, but he wasn't ready. There was still so much left to say.

"Frances?" he asked, looking at her enquiringly. "What is it?"

"I am only glad you are safe." Frances sighed, closing her eyes briefly. When she opened them, the sadness was gone. "And well, by the looks of it."

"Yes, I am on the mend, the doctor says." Ralph smiled. "Thanks to you."

"Well, not me alone," Frances corrected lightly, staring at the bed covers. Ralph couldn't help the feeling that she was pulling away from him again, hiding something. Was she merely embarrassed, but why should she be? She had sat by his bedside for three days, held his hand, even laid by his side (though she thought he did not remember). He tugged her hand lightly again, and she reluctantly lifted her eyes up to his.

"Frances, it was you who pulled me through," Ralph said. "It was the thought of you, of your presence, that gave me reason to live."

He swallowed hard but tried to go on. It was the only way for her to truly understand the depth of his feeling.

"When I was in fever, I saw things. Strange visions and memories. I recalled Lowenna and she came to me and it was ... awful." Ralph closed his eyes against the remembrance of her cold, dead face. "But she asked me who I loved and... and then I saw you."

He opened his eyes. Frances sat very still; her eyes fixed on their hands held together.

"Why do you tell me this?" she asked eventually, her voice quiet.

"I think you know why," Ralph spoke softly, gently rubbing his thumb over the back of her hand.

"I don't," Frances looked up at him with questioning eyes. "We both know I must leave you now."

"To go to Lord Hart?" Ralph tried to swallow back the bitter bile of his hatred for the man.

"That's what you told me to do," Frances said levelly.

He could see she was struggling to control her emotions, but he didn't understand why. He thought she would be eager to hear his thoughts, his change of heart. On the morning she had left him, her eyes had begged him to ask her to stay. Why were they not doing so again? Was it because of Arabella, and the attempt she had made on Frances' life?

"That was always the plan, wasn't it?" Frances continued. "What you wanted? To protect us? For me to go?"

"No. I never wanted that, Frances."

"You told me you did!" Frances' head jerked up and she stared at him in surprise. Ralph held her hands tightly, not wanting her to pull away.

"I know I did, and I thought I meant it then, but now....," Ralph took a shuddering breath, unsure how to say what he needed to say. "I could have lost you, Frances, at my sister's hands, no less. It woke me up. Now I know what I want. Now I want you to stay."

"No," Frances shook her head, her fingers twisting in his hands. "I - I can't do this."

"Yes, you can!" Ralph leaned forward, cupping Frances' face in his hands and staring into her anguished, golden eyes. He didn't understand why she looked like she was in so much pain.

"I want you to, I am asking you to! Please."

He pressed his forehead against hers, breathing in her intoxicating scent and hearing her rapid, shallow breaths. He tried to press his lips against hers, and for one perfect moment of stillness, he felt her respond. Felt the melting fire of her desire filling him, but then she broke away.

"No!" Frances pressed her hand over her mouth, turning her face

away from him. “No, I can’t do this.”

“Why? Don’t you -,” Ralph stumbled over the words. *Don’t you love me?* Was what he wanted to say, but he couldn’t quite do it. “- Want to stay?” he finished, staring at her.

“I can’t.” Frances face was agonised, but her eyes burned with determination. Ralph’s heart dropped at her words, “I’m sorry, Ralph. I have to leave you.”

Chapter Nineteen

I must leave him, I must! It is for his own good, I must be strong -

Frances couldn't bear to look at him, couldn't bear to face him as she moved quickly around the room to gather her travelling bonnet and coat, everything else, she would leave behind. She just needed to leave as soon as possible, run from the situation before he said something so heart-breaking, before she lost all her self-control. She could never tell him, she must never tell him why she had gone, he would be much better if she never did, but his questions hounded her, his voice rising in confusion and anger as he sought desperately for an explanation.

"Why, Frances?" He demanded, standing in the centre of the room as she moved around him like a comet. "I - I thought you felt the same - why should you leave me now?"

"I just must!" She grabbed her ladies' purse, not noticing that she had swept her diary to the floor and under the bed. "Please, Wynter, you - you know my commitments -,"

"But nothing has been said between you, nothing has been agreed - Frances, stop!"

He grabbed her wrist, forcing her to look at him. Frances could barely stand it, but she had forgotten, momentarily, the tremendous force of his spirit and presence.

"Look at me!" he commanded and Frances could not help but obey him as instinctively as when he had held her in his arms and pinned her against the books in the library. Despite her desperation to leave, to get out, to run away from him and from the love he was offering her, she was also rooted to the spot, magnetised by his voice and

touch.

“Have you made an agreement with him? Since - since the night of the ball?” She saw his throat constrict tightly as he held her tightly. “Did he send a letter; did you send one?”

“No, nothing like that.” Frances tried to look away twisting her hand to try and free herself. “But I told you, I - he asked - he expressed intent - how would it look if I stayed here now?”

“It would look like what it is, Frances.” His voice was low, his face far too close to hers.

“No, I cannot -.” Frances twisted her face, no longer able to hold his gaze, fearful that he would kiss her, and all her resolve would weaken with it. “It is not proper since he has -”

“Declared intent?” Ralph finished for her. “Well, what if other intents were declared, Frances? What if other offers were made?”

“You said you would not make them.” Frances lips fumbled on her words as she felt the heat of Ralph’s gaze and his firm hands travelling up her arms to grip her shoulders. “You said -,”

“I know what I said!”

Ralph’s hands held either side of her neck, pulling her gaze up to his face. He was flushed and his eyes were wild with passion.

“I was wrong, Frances, I know I am late, and I should have spoken the truth of my heart that very evening but I -”

“No!” Frances squirmed against him. She could not bear to hear him confess his love to her, not now, not now she had to leave him. “No, you must not say these words to me!”

“Why not?” Ralph demanded, but she had squirmed her way out of his grasp and stumbled back away from him. Frances pressed a hand against her beating heart and tried to steady herself.

“Because - because ...”

Because I love you too dearly to deceive you! She thought, desperately.
Because I am not worthy of you, I will not be like her -

“Because it is not proper,” she finished, breathing deeply. She grasped her travelling coat tightly, twisting it in her hands. She must leave before things went too far, got too out of hand.

“Stop it!” Ralph reached for it, wrenching it from her grasp and tossing it across the room where it landed by the door. He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her toward him, pressing her chest against his, his hands cradling the back of her head.

“Frances, nothing I feel for you is proper,” he growled, his fingers beginning to twist into her hair.

“We must not,” Frances whimpered, staring at the ticking pulse at his throat. His skin was bare, flushed slightly, but pale as stone underneath. How she longed to touch it, to kiss it. She bit her lip hard.

“You must not speak of such things to me,” she whispered.

“Then I shall show you!”

Ralph’s mouth was on hers in a second, his lips hot and coals and one arm wrapping around her body to hold her tightly to him. He wore only a light shirt with no waistcoat, and she could feel the hard muscles of his chest pressing against her breasts. She felt a rush of fiery passion inside her, and to her astonishment, felt her own nipples hardening inside her stays.

You cannot have him! A voice inside her roared. *You must leave him, now!*

“I have to go!” she gasped and squirmed, pulling away, her whole-body trembling like a leaf.

“Why?” Ralph demanded. His chest was rising and falling. She deliberately looked away. “Why, when you know of my feelings? When I know of yours?”

“For all the reasons I have said!” Frances tied her bonnet around her head, her fingers fumbling, and it quickly fell down her back, the

ribbons resting at her throat.

“They are none of them adequate!” Ralph shouted, running his fingers through his dark hair. “You have been by my side, you came back, you have shown me in every way that you reciprocate my feelings, so why?”

He stared at her, but Frances said nothing, unable to speak. Unable to tell him what he needed to hear in order to release her - because she was so afraid of losing his love. *You must do it, you must!* Ralph’s shoulders sagged as he looked at her, still as a statue, and he ran a hand over his mouth.

“I did not mean to shout,” he said quietly. “Forgive me.”

Frances said nothing. She barely trusted herself to breathe.

“Come to me, Frances.” He held out his hand to her. “Come to me.”

Frances knew she must not, knew it was the worst thing she could possibly do, but she couldn’t help it. When he commanded her, she could not help but obey him, as if her soul answered his without any volition of her body or mind. She placed her hand into his and let him pull her, like a man pulling a rope, back to the warm circle of his body heat.

“You must explain it to me,” he whispered, running his hands up and down her arms so she shivered. “You must give me a reason, a real reason, why you wish to part from me.”

Frances trembled as his lips met hers, slow and sweet, so tender that Frances couldn’t help the tears welling in her eyes as she bent her head away from his lips, shuddering with tears.

“Tell me,” Ralph rasped, his voice harsh as he spoke with his lips against her hair. “For the love of God, Frances, you must tell me what is in your heart!”

“I cannot!” Frances shook her head, pressing her palms against his chest, trying to keep him away. “You - you will - you will hate me!”

“Frances, there is nothing you could say to make me hate you -,”

Ralph pressed his lips to hers again and again, kissing away her tears, her protestations, until Frances could barely think rationally - but one thought circulated around and around, until she couldn't hold it in anymore. It burst from her lips as she pushed him away:

"I am just like her!" Frances cried out, watching as Ralph stumbled backwards, confusion in his eyes. "I am just like Arabella, and like her, I must be banished from your presence, or taint you with my own!"

"What on earth do you -?"

The door sprung open and Marie stood there, carrying a tea tray. She looked shocked and surprised to see Ralph and Frances standing far too close together, passion in their eyes and faces.

"Ex-excuse me, sir." Marie nodded, lifting the tray uncomfortably. "I - I have some tea, for you Miss."

"It's quite all right." Frances took her chance to move towards the door, sweeping up her jacket as she went and pushing past Marie. She saw Holton waiting on the landing and knew he must have been listening.

"Holton, please call the carriage around, I must leave - immediately!"

"Yes, Miss Fortescue."

If Holton was surprised by her instruction, he didn't show it, and quickly nodded for a serving boy to rush down the stairs.

"Frances, wait!" Ralph called, following her quickly and grasping her arm, despite Holton's presence. "You cannot simply say such things without an explanation -,"

"Perhaps you had better return inside, sir," Holton requested, his eyes darting along the hallway.

"No, no, forgive me," Frances spoke over him, knowing that if she returned into the bedroom with Ralph all her willpower would melt away to nothing and she would never leave his arms.

"I must go immediately, Holton, please arrange to have my trunk sent after to my father's estate."

"Of course."

Frances heard Holton's agreement behind her, but she had already fled. Hurrying down the stairs, trying to put as much distance as possible between her and Ralph, but she had underestimated the speed and desperation of him. Ralph might have been recovering a fever, but he had sat through a day of rest and solitude - and now the spur of the woman he loved, disappearing in front of his eyes, made him move with unaccountable quickness. Frances had barely reached the bottom of the grand staircase when his firm hand gripped her arm, pulling her around.

"Explain yourself!" he panted, his dark hair tousled against his forehead.

"In the parlour, sir!" Holton called, following down the stairs.

Frances noticed the way the butler's eyes flickered back up the landing to where Matilda's room was. Despite Frances' eagerness to leave the estate, to no longer have to stare into the eyes of the man she loved as she left him, she felt her own duty towards Matilda. She would never want her to witness such a distressing argument between herself and her father, especially after the torment of the day the little girl had already endured. Frances glanced to the main door.

The coach was not there yet, and she could not yet flee entirely from Ralph's grasp, so permitted him to pull her into the parlour. Holton closed the door on the two of them, no doubt to stand on the other side and keep guard, so no one would disturb them - or see the Duke of Sinclair fighting passionately with a girl of eighteen. Frances steeled herself and turned to face him, pulling her jacket on and tossing her hair over her shoulder. Her throat was burning from the pressure of Arabella's scarf and she felt like she could faint any moment, she was so tired of it all, but she must persist. *Be cold, be calm*, she told herself, *get out before you lose your mind* -

"I have nothing to explain," she tried to keep her voice calm. "I have given my reasons -"

"They make no sense!" Ralph exclaimed, shrugging at her in

confusion. "How can you say that you are like my sister?"

"I am young, I am vain, I think too much of myself, I always have." Frances lifted her chin, trying not to let herself stumble over my words. "I am not suitable for you, Your Grace, I never have been."

"That is ridiculous nonsense and you know it!" Ralph reached for her hand, holding it tight. "You are young, but you have always displayed kindness and generosity and your feelings towards me -,"

"My feelings are - are not what you think."

Frances knew she would have to lie to him, how else would he ever believe her and let her go? Frances couldn't look at him as she lied to him, instead she stared out of the window, trying to gather the strength.

"I - I do not feel as - as strongly as I thought." Frances tried to pull her hand away, but Ralph held on tight, his eyes full of questions. "It - it has been nothing more than a - a flirtation for me, Wynter, and - and I am sorry if - if you felt differently -,"

"I don't believe you," Ralph grabbed her elbows. "Look at me and tell me that."

Frances met his eyes reluctantly. She must do it. She knew she must. Better that he thought she felt less than she did than she had to fully confess the depth of her sin towards him. But she couldn't do it. As soon as she saw his golden-brown eyes staring down at her with a mixture of love and confusion, her words failed her entirely.

"I - I - didn't feel -," she tried to say, her whisper getting lost as Ralph's lips came closer to hers.

"I know you're afraid of your feelings," he whispered, and Frances could feel the feathery breath of his words on her lips. "I understand, I was too. But when we are together, we can face any fear."

His words were everything Frances longed to hear, and everything she feared.

"I - I can't -" Frances tried to back away, but Ralph simply moved with

her until her spine was pressed up against the piano forte. There was nowhere to run, no way to escape his warm hands and enticing words.

“Yes, you can,” Ralph’s voice was hoarse. His hands found her hips, clutching her manfully. “We can do it together.”

“Wynter,” she whispered, unable to stop herself pressing against him, her body was betraying her and feeling his own sharp, intake of breath as she did so. “I - I must leave you -,”

“Shhh.” His fingers pressed against her lips, making her catch her breath. “There’s no one but you, Frances.”

As his lips met hers in a soft rush of passion, she couldn’t help responding, filled up with desire and anxiety, robbed her of her sense of practicality entirely. Reacting to her desire Ralph grasped her around the waist and lifted her up to sit on the piano lid, cupping her face and staring into her eyes.

“Stay,” he whispered throatily. “Stay with me, Frances.”

“I can’t.”

“Then tell me why!” Ralph’s eyes blazed with sudden anger. “The real reason, not these lies and diversions; Lord Hart, that all of this has been a flirtation, that you’re like my sister -”

“I am like her!” Frances insisted, “You don’t understand!”

“That is untrue!” Ralph growled. “Don’t lie to me!”

“I am not lying!” Frances pushed him away, breathing heavily. She knew that she had run out of options - she had no choice but to reveal the darkest part of her, the real reason that she had to leave him. For a second, she allowed herself to take in the sight of him: his hair mussed, his shirt neck loose and sensual, his eyes bright with desire and his face carved in love. Soon, he would never look at her like that again.

“I - I came here under false pretences.” She felt her eyes filling with tears. “I’m not what you think, Wynter.”

“What do you mean?” he asked quietly.

She closed her eyes against the pain of what she had to say.

“I am like your sister, in more ways than you can possibly understand. I - I didn’t gain an invitation to Sinclair Manor incidentally. I deliberately sought out Arabella hoping to gain access to you.”

“Why?”

Ralph had become very still and simply stared at her. She wished that he was still reaching out for her, still trying to hold her, but he wasn’t. She could feel him pulling away, his passion cooling with every word she spoke. It was what she wanted, what she had planned all along, but she still couldn’t stop the tears from slipping down her cheeks.

“Because I wanted to be close to you,” Frances whispered. “I - I desired you from afar and - and I had need of you.”

“Need of me?” Ralph’s voice sharpened and Frances tried not to flinch.

“You know of my father’s bad investment.” Frances twisted her fingers together, her cheeks flushing hot and painful with shame. “You know that - that he lost a considerable fortune. What you don’t know is - is that he made clear to me I would have to marry quickly and marry well. I - I - chose you. That is why I came here, Wynter, to - to seduce you.”

“For my fortune,” Ralph said flatly. “You used me?”

“Yes, and in the worst way.”

Frances closed her eyes tightly, trying not to sob. She gritted her teeth to control her tears.

“What do you mean by that?” Ralph’s voice was almost pleading with sadness. Part of him didn’t want to know these things about her, but she knew the other part of him - deserved to know the truth. She steeled herself for the worst blow:

“I made a wager with my cousin that ... that I would make you my husband.”

She forced herself to look into his eyes, preparing to see revulsion, but all she saw was mortification. He stared at her as if he did not know her, and it broke her completely. Still, she made herself go on.

“You see, I am no different from her. I - I pursued you for what you could provide, not for your own self. I - I have lied and treated you abominably, and I - I am not worthy of your kindness or your generosity or your love.”

“I see.” Ralph looked out of the window, his throat working intensely. “All of the intimacies we have shared... they were... constructed?”

Frances felt herself shrink away inside at the disgust in his voice.

“At first,” Frances swallowed hard, her words choking her intensely. “Yes, at first I - I deliberately sought out ways to be close to you, I - I brought you tea, and wore - wore revealing gowns -,”

She noticed his eye twitching at her words and felt as if her emotions had curdled inside her and now all she could taste was bitterness.

“- I tried to discern what you found appealing about me and - and tried to increase those moments.”

“I see.”

Ralph folded his arms across his chest, and she knew that it was working, he was withdrawing from her, but she could feel no joy in it. No satisfaction; only intense, unbridled agony at losing his love.

“And - and you - you hid this from me,” Ralph said quietly. “In order to secure my affections?”

“At first, yes,” Frances confessed.

“At first?” Ralph’s eyebrows raised slightly. “Did something change?”

“I - I -,”

Frances desperately wanted to tell him that she had changed, that she had completely fallen in love with him, but she couldn’t. She mustn’t. She was too ashamed to try and fall on his mercy, so she swallowed

her sadness deep down.

“No - no,” she said, gulping hard. “No.”

“You deceived me.” Ralph spoke softly but his voice held no sadness or pity, rather, it seemed filled with a quiet fury. “This is... intolerable.”

“I know,” Frances gasped, sucking in her tears. “I know it is.”

“I could have forgiven vanity or self-involvement but...” She heard the choke in his voice and didn’t dare look into his face. “You manipulated me under the guise of friendship and - and I have never had a friend like you.”

“Wynter,” she whispered.

“Or I thought I had never had a friend like you.” He shook his head, laughing bitterly for himself. “My, it is... it is quite a day for betrayals.”

“I’m sorry,” Frances whispered.

“So am I.”

They both stood in silence, listening to the sound of the carriage pull around to the front of the house, and the screech of the coach wheels against the gravel. *It’s finished. It’s done. He doesn’t want you anymore.* Slowly, Frances buttoned her coat, her fingers numb and wobbly. She set her bonnet on her head, and then, when she was sure she had the courage to face it, finally looked back into Ralph’s face. He caught her gaze reluctantly, and she saw in his dark eyes all the pain he was feeling. She noticed how his body trembled, and saw that he must be exhausted, having used so much of his energy to engage her in this discussion.

“You should go and rest, Your Grace,” she said quietly.

“I thank you,” Ralph said coldly, “but I shall take my medical advice from those who have only my best interests at heart.”

The words stung her deeply. She was only doing any of this, breaking

her own heart in two for his own benefit, because she knew it was right. The door behind them opened and Holton looked in, his face grave.

“Miss Fortescue, your carriage is here.”

“Thank you, Holton.”

She turned to Ralph. His face was cold and pale, his stance steady and filled with rage. She knew him too well. She knew that inside him passion was transforming to bitterness and fury. He believed himself a fool, she knew it, and she knew he would turn the blame he felt towards her towards himself if she let him continue to believe he had been entirely hoodwinked. She took a deep breath. No matter how painful, how humiliating it was to admit this to a man who must now despise her, she must do it. Otherwise she knew his distaste and rage would turn inwards, like it had done with his wife, and poison him.

“I must say something before I leave you forever,” she said quietly.

“I think you have said enough,” Ralph interrupted bitterly. “More than enough for a lifetime of regret and disappointment.”

“Please, if - if you have any feeling for me that still lingers, you will listen to me,” she begged.

“Of course I have feeling!” Ralph hissed, gripping his own arms tightly.

“Then please let me speak. Do not interrupt me, I beg you, and then I shall leave. I swear it.”

She wondered if he would ask her to stay again, if he might renew his demands of love and reciprocation, but he did not. Her confession had done its damage. Now all that she had to hope for was that his lingering regard and the manners of his station belied him to give her what she had asked for, even if he already believed she had taken too much. She waited for him to nod curtly, and then steeled herself to reveal the truth of her heart, making herself hold his angry, hurt gaze.

“However this began,” she said quietly. “However duplicitous I have been, however ... untruthful in my actions, my admiration for you has always been entirely genuine. From the first moment I saw you at

Ascot, I felt ... drawn to you, somehow. I thought it was fortune alone, and your handsome features, and I admit that was the star I was guided by at the beginning of her friendship but ... but what happened after was guided entirely by yourself."

She looked into the depths of his eyes, half hoping for some spark of recognition, but there was none. He simply waited, dispassionate, for her to finish. She ploughed on.

"You said you did not know how to forgive Arabella for the scope of her deceit, and I understand that you will never forgive me, either. Perhaps it is for the best, since you are deserving of someone who is above all ill-mannered deceptions." Frances felt her tears falling and brushed them away, forcing herself to go on. "But you must know, lest you punish yourself cruelly for being doubly manipulated by women you have loved –"

She saw him twitch at her words, and a flame of rage appear in his eyes, but she was not afraid. Almost everything had been said now; there was no need to fear the past.

"- that since ... since perhaps our first ride together, I have felt only admiration for you."

Frances had completely forgotten Holton's presence, and so it seemed had Ralph. The two of them stared at one another as if they were the only two people in the world and Holton watched on, silently witnessing their despair.

"But I cannot lie any more, Ralph."

His eyes widened at the use of his first name, but Frances did not care. She needed him to understand.

"Do not blame yourself," she whispered. "None of this is your fault. It is all my doing, and I must suffer for it. All you must know is that you have been admired by an unworthy, foolish girl who never deserved your heart. You deserve more than to be treated as a means to an end."

"And Lord Hart?" Ralph asked quietly, his eyes blazing. "He deserves such treatment?"

“He and I are neither of us under any illusions,” Frances shrugged hopelessly. “He will marry me for my beauty and I for his status.”

“A mercenary exchange,” Ralph scoffed. “So much for marrying a man you truly love.”

She couldn’t look at him anymore or hear the way his tone had changed towards her.

“I bid you farewell, Your Grace.”

She walked out of the room, dashing her tears away with the back of her hand, leaving Ralph behind. She walked at steadily as she could to the carriage and climbed inside as Holton held open the door for her. She looked into his face, expecting to see disgust and dismay on his master’s behalf but saw only pity.

“Safe travels, my lady,” he said softly.

Frances nodded tremulously. “Look after him, Holton.”

Holton closed the door. Frances sat back in the carriage and tried not to let her eyes drift towards the parlour windows, but they did. She saw him there, standing just where she left him, looking at the floor. She half hoped he would look up at her, see the ravages of grief and heartbreak on her face and call her back, tell her all was forgiven, but he didn’t. He didn’t raise his head, and he didn’t step forward. As the carriage jerked and began to move away, he didn’t come after them and Frances knew then, deep in her soul, that she had lost him forever.

Chapter Twenty

“*M*iss Fortescue, we hear you were recently the guest of Lady Adley. Is it true what the Ton is saying about her?”

Frances looked up from her cup of tea into the faces of the expectant ladies around the table at her cousin's manor in London. They had assembled for afternoon on the account of Amelia who would be married the following week. Small gifts were being exchanged, good wishes and kind words, but really it was an opportunity to gossip and to hear of Amelia's finalised wedding plans and judge them accordingly. Unfortunately, Frances had unwittingly fallen into the role of the most interesting person at the table due to her acquaintance with Sinclair Manor.

“I am not sure what is being said about Lady Adley, so I could hardly comment,” Frances said, sipping her tea.

“Come, Miss Frances!” One of Amelia's insipid friends leaned closer with eager eyes. “Everyone is saying she is going to be prosecuted for trying to murder her brother!”

“Murder, Kitty? You can't be earnest!”

The girls leaned forward, faces askance, and flushed with excitement. The bringer of the gossip, Kitty looked most pleased with herself and nodded to Frances.

“I am right, aren't I, Miss Fortescue?” She smiled, looking like a smug cat. “She's in jail at the moment, and all that is needed for the Duke to press his case.”

“Must we talk of this?” Amelia complained.

She scowled at her cousin, leaning back in her chair like a frustrated child. She hated that Frances was getting all the attention and for once, Frances was happy to oblige her cousin. She wished she could vanish into the wallpaper. She tried to diver their attention.

“I can hardly comment -” she murmured. “Tell me, Amy, what flowers shall you have in your posy?”

Before Amelia could answer, another girl had leaned forward, her shawl trailing in the jam and her eyes fixed on Kitty.

“The Duke of Sinclair could hardly press for a conviction against his sister!” she gasped. “What if she was hanged?”

“This is hardly appropriate discussion,” Catherine reprimanded, setting down her teacup with a frown. Frances gave her friend a sideways smile, gratefully. She had only agreed to attend the occasion with Catherine in tow, and luckily, Amelia was eager for her little gathering to be graced by the high-status Lady Bowles. Even though Catherine and Frances had not yet had an opportunity to discuss what had taken place at Sinclair Manor, Catherine was ready to be a supportive friend. Unfortunately, Amelia was too dense to notice that the young girls were looking suitably chastened by the older woman’s rebuke and felt she had to contribute.

“Oh please!” Amelia snorted. “People are not hanged for embezzlement, Lucy, don’t be a dolt! All that stuff about poison is just gossip.”

“You think so?” Lucy whispered.

“Of course it is,” Catherine said. “Lucy, child, your shawl -,”

“Oh - oh dear,” Lucy said, noticing her shawl for the first time. “Yes, I suppose you are right, Lady Bowles.”

Unfortunately, Kitty was not as easily deferred as the other girls. Kitty was one of Amelia’s closest friends and Frances had never liked her. Spiteful, immature, and a horrendous gossip, she and Amelia deserved each other but together they were a menace.

“Well, apparently he nearly died of sickness caused by her actions,” Kitty said, trying to reignite the interest in her story. She settled her

gaze of Frances as if she was a particularly juicy piece of fruit. "It was quite a close thing, I'm told, and Miss Fortescue was there!"

"You were?" Lucy gasped, losing interest in her ruined shawl completely.

"Oh yes," Kitty smiled and sipped her tea, happy with her stirring. "My mama says Miss Fortescue was a most particular friend of the Sinclair's, until recently."

Frances stared at Kitty and imagined herself launching her body over the tea pots and slapping the girl soundly across the face.

"I have been very fortunate to enjoy the acquaintance of the Duke of Sinclair," she spoke evenly, trying to keep her voice level. "He has been a good friend to my family."

"I heard that he has shut himself away in his house, sent his nephew to France, his daughter to school," Kitty sipped her tea. The other ladies' eyes swivelled to Frances as if following the ball in racquetball.

"I know nothing of that situation -"

Frances tried to swallow back the pain she felt at the thought of Ralph alone in the Manor, wallowing in his anger and pain. *God, please let it not be so!*

"- except to say that Lord Adley has long planned to travel in Europe and the Lady Wynter is at a suitable age for schooling."

She held her teacup tightly, forcing herself to stop her hand from shaking with rage. She took a careful sip, making herself appear nonchalant, even though every eye in the group was waiting on her words with bated breath.

"I would suggest it is not wise to speculate on the inner workings of a man who leads a rich and interesting life and provides well for his family."

Kitty would not be deterred.

"My mama says he has settled on his nephew, practically disowning

him, if that could be called 'provision'," Kitty smirked. "Hardly the actions of a man in his best mind."

"Settling on the child of a relative - who may be convicted of a crime, is indeed provision," Catherine snapped. "Especially when that child is a fully-grown man who can more than provide for himself. Most people of any comprehension would call it more provision - it is generous."

"Yet I have heard he will see no one," Kitty pressed. "That he is much reduced since his illness and might die."

"Kitty!" Amelia exclaimed. She darted her eyes around the room, and Frances knew that she was frightened her friend was taking her comments too far, and word would get back to her soon-to-husband. The Marquess Huntley was a serious man who did not appreciate gossip.

"You go too far, Miss Reynolds."

Frances glared at the girl, and was gratified when she cast her eyes down, respectful of what was left of Frances' title and status. It pained Frances greatly to speak of Ralph, but she couldn't let this kind of comment slide. Whatever she said here she knew would be taken and repeated far and wide, so she knew she had to be strong. She straightened her back and spoke carefully, ensuring none of her words could be missed:

"I left Sinclair Manor recently, and the Duke was in good health. Any other rumours about him and his family are not in my purview, but as a friend of his family I would suggest that you show him the respect due to both his rank and reputation as a friend of the Prince Regent."

The mention of the Prince Regent seemed to have done the trick. All the girls flushed and looked down at their plates, except Amelia who glared at her cousin ungratefully. Despite Frances' attempts to draw the attention away from herself, Amelia's resentment was still palatable.

"It is such a shame that such a reputable man is still unmarried," she said, her eyes glittering malevolently.

Frances glared back and said nothing. Her cousin had said nothing

about the bet they had engaged at the start of the summer and knew she never would, but Frances also knew that she could expect jabs like these about Ralph for the rest of their lives. She only hoped it would grow less painful over time.

“Oh yes,” Lucy sighed, her eyes losing focus. Frances felt an unnecessary flame of possessiveness and jealousy. “He is so handsome and sad.”

“And has the reputation as quite a womaniser,” Amelia added, raising her eyebrows at Frances. “Many women have fallen prey to his dark eyes and slow smile.”

Her words inflicted more pain than she knew. Frances was immediately transported back to her first kiss, the incredible, furious passion of his lips against hers and the gravelly commands he had delivered, demanding to know that he meant more to her than any other man. Her eyes stung with bitter unshed tears, but she blinked them back, hiding quickly behind her fan and staring out of the window. Catherine caught her eye behind her own fan.

“Are you alright?” she mouthed, frowning.

Frances nodded tautly, unable to speak. She gulped repeatedly and tried to nibble a little cake, but it tasted like ash in her mouth.

“I had heard that the Duke had his eye on someone at Lady Adley’s summer ball - at Sinclair Manor,” Kitty looked at Frances carefully. “Did you dance with him on that occasion, Miss Frances?”

Frances remembered the large span of Ralph’s manly hands around her waist, as they passed one another in the dance. She recalled how angry he had been, how furious she had felt, how intense their attraction to one another had been.

“I did not,” Frances kept her voice light, trying to swallow her cake. “I danced with the Prince Regent.”

“And Lord Hart,” Lucy giggled, tossing her silly curls. “Everyone heard how he preferred you that evening.”

“Lord Hart is - another - friend of the family,” Frances said automatically. She could feel that she was starting to detach from the

conversation. Her memories of Ralph seemed more real to her than the company of these petty young girls.

“I had heard that the Duke of Sinclair may have preferred someone that evening also,” Kitty said suggestively, wiggling her eyebrows. Frances knew what she was implying but didn’t have the energy to reprimand her.

“If that were true, Miss Kitty, Miss Frances should hardly be a position to comment upon it,” Catherine pushed back her chair, picking up her fan and looking down on the young girls disdainfully. “This conversation has become quite tiresome. I think I shall take a turn around the garden. Won’t you join me, Miss Fortescue?”

“Of course.”

Frances was more than happy to leave the group, and gratefully slipped her arm into her friends. As they swept past the table, she saw Amelia jerking her head around to Kitty and reprimanding her sharply.

“No doubt Kitty shall find herself on the sharp end of Amelia’s tongue,” Catherine muttered.

“But not for her impropriety,” Frances said. She watched Kitty’s face flush with embarrassment as Amelia’s little mouth turned into a pout. “Only for misdirecting Amelia’s attention.”

“Odious girl.” Catherine sighed. “How unfortunate that she is your relation.”

“Indeed.”

The two women stepped out into the garden. Despite the autumnal chill, the sun was shining brightly, and it was warm enough for the ladies to stroll together with just their shawls. Frances was grateful for the quiet peace of the red and orange leaves rustling in the trees and the lonesome song of the blackbird in the trees. There was still a hint of dew on the grass and, despite her best efforts, she couldn’t help but think of her first early morning ride with Ralph when she had spoken to him properly for the first time and felt the first real stirrings of love in her heart.

“Are you alright, my dear?” Catherine asked gently.

“Not truly,” Frances answered. “But time heals all wounds.”

“Was it dreadful?” Catherine whispered. “With Lady Arabella? I couldn’t believe it at first.”

“Neither could I.”

Unconsciously, Frances reached up and touched the wide ribbon with a cameo she had taken to wearing around her throat. It concealed the pink scar on her skin that remained from Arabella’s attempt to strangle her.

“Yes, it was dreadful, but that was not the worst of it,” Frances sighed.

“I was surprised when you wrote that you and Lord Hart would soon be engaged.” Catherine was the only person, aside from Ralph and her father, who knew of this. “After seeing you with the Duke at his manor I had thought -,”

“I thought so, too, for a while.” Frances blinked tiredly. “But it was not to be.”

Catherine held onto Frances’ arm, forcing her to look into her friend’s face. Catherine searched Frances’ eyes intently, and Frances couldn’t help the overwhelming need to cry that came over her. She tried to hold it back, but it was impossible. A large tear swelled in her eye and fell down her cheek.

“Oh, my dear friend,” Catherine rummaged for a handkerchief and pressed it to Frances’ face. “Come, have a seat with me.”

She guided Frances to a bench under a great oak tree, strewn around with yellow, gold and red leaves.

“I’m - I’m sorry, Catherine - do forgive me -”

Frances sat down heavily, pressing the handkerchief over her face and unable to stop the sobs racking her body and she leaned her elbows on her knees, letting all her tears that had been bottled up since she had left Ralph flow out of her.

“Oh, dear Frances,” Catherine rubbed her back tenderly. “You have it very badly, don’t you?”

“Have - have - what?”

Frances looked up at her friend blearily, who smiled pityingly.

“Love,” she said. “Only love makes a woman weep like this. You fell in love with him, didn’t you?”

Frances nodded, miserably. She knew her friend would never tell a soul, but she needed someone to know. She needed someone to witness the fact that it had happened, before she married Lord Hart and had to bury the memories entirely forever.

“I was a fool to think I could deserve him.” Frances sniffled, rubbing her nose with the handkerchief. “I feel as if my heart is broken.”

“I am sure you do.” Catherine patted her knee comfortingly. “And you may do for a little while, but it is for the best, dear one.”

“Why would you say that?” Frances stared at Catherine in amazement.

“Why, because it is much better, if possible, not to love your husband with the fury of a first love.”

Catherine squeezed her hand gently. Frances noticed then that Catherine’s own eyes were looking a little blurry.

“No one can hurt you as a first love can,” Catherine went on. “It is best, I think, not to have a first love for husband. For then, your husband can never hurt you as badly as your first love has done.”

“You think I should not love Lord Hart?” Frances asked quietly.

“No, of course you should!” Catherine’s eyes widened and she nodded vigorously. “Love him, indeed, if you can. But just... not as much or as painfully as you have loved before.”

Frances blinked slowly and nodded, lifting her gaze to the falling autumn leaves. All good things had to end, and this was just another ending. She knew she would miss him until the end of her life, but

part of her was secretly grateful she would. Then at least she would hold onto one small part of him.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Sir, your correspondence has arrived.”

“Leave it on the table, Holton.”

Ralph stared out of his study window, at the golden orange leaves falling from the trees and tried not to notice how they shone in the sunshine and looked exactly like Frances’ hair.

“Shall I open it for you, sir?”

“If you want.”

Ralph found he wasn’t really interested in his business now. Since he had arranged for Matilda to go away to school, and packed Philip away to Brussels, the house felt huge and lonely. Mrs Bury had even had reason to close parts of the house; whipping white sheets over the furniture and closing of the shutters. Ralph had thought he would feel mournful about it, but he was letting the sensation of depression settle on him like a shroud. He found that he had no fight in him to protest the lowering darkness of his soul. He tried not to think of Frances, but it was impossible. Wherever he went he felt the ghost of her presence and energy lingering in the house, more persistent than the ghost of his wife. *God save me*, he thought bleakly, resting his head back against the leather of his chair: *Am I going to be haunted by her, too?*

“The first here is a letter from your solicitor in London,” Holton said, his dark eyes rapidly taking in the words on the page. “He says that since you are not pressing charges against Lady Arabella, the case against her will be dropped. Her son will be responsible for her. If that is still your wish?”

“It is.”

Thinking of Arabella immediately took Ralph back to the last time he had spoken to his sister. It had only been a few weeks before, but it felt like a lifetime ago. As he sat, he relived the encounter in his memory.



Ralph had gone to visit Arabella once when she was still being held in the local jail. It had not been a successful visit. Arabella had been cold and distant as Ralph explained, as quickly as possible that he would not be pursuing charges against her. She had snorted and folded her arms.

“I suppose I should be grateful.”

Ralph tried to swallow down his rage at her lack of gratitude or regret. He balled his hands into fists and spoke slowly.

“Do you not have an ounce of remorse for your actions?” he asked, forcing himself to look into her face. “Toward me? Or toward Frances?”

“That girl deserves nothing from me,” Arabella scowled. She was pale and her hair was untidy. She looked smaller than she had done at home. Ralph felt a wave of hopelessness overtake him at the degradation of his family. First his mother had left them, dying when they were younger, then his many brothers and sisters over the years, then his father, his wife, and now his sister was lost to him too. If possible, she was lost in an even worse way, for whilst he could still love his family members who had died, he knew he could no longer love Arabella.

“I shall be seeking recompense for the money you embezzled from the Sinclair estate, from the Adley fortune of your son,” he said, his voice hard. He didn’t want her to hang, but he did want restitution for her behaviour. For Matilda, if for no other reason.

“It should have been mine,” Arabella’s face tightened in anger and Ralph saw, for the first time, the flash of the jealousy and fury that Holton had mentioned. “All of it should have been mine.”

“I have to say, I have very little interest in what you think should have been yours.”

"I am sure you don't."

For the first time, Arabella eyes met his. Her green eyes were dull and lifeless. For the first time the deep echoes of her mercenary nature were visible to him. He almost flinched at the malice he saw there. She resented him, that much was sure, for his position in their family and perhaps for a long list of grievances he was not aware of, and it was clear that she held none of the sweet memories of childhood that he did. He looked away.

"Well then," he said, turning his hat in his hand and knocking on the jail-room door for the constable to let him out.

"She is gone, then?" Arabella asked.

"Who?" Ralph was surprised by the question and did not think about what continuing in conversation with his sister might do to him.

"The strumpet." Arabella smirked at his face and he saw her eyes light with mean enjoyment. She knew what any mention of Frances would do to him and she relished his pain. "Fortescue's girl."

"I cannot see how it is any of your business," Ralph's fingers twitched with anger. "But yes, she had left."

Arabella nodded, as if satisfied.

"I knew she would." She smirked again, and this time the malicious grin lit up her entire face eerily. "I knew it would work. I won."

"You won what? What would work?"

Ralph's memory flashed back to the day Arabella had left the manor. He recalled the way that she had pulled Frances close, talking to her rapidly before trying to strangle her. With a sudden wave of panic, he imagine what kind of horrible poison Arabella might have poured into Frances' ears.

"What did you say to her?" Ralph grabbed his sister by the arm. "What did you do?"

Arabella smiled up at him, as if completely unfazed by his vice like

grip on her.

“I showed her who she was, brother.” Her voice was soft but filled with malevolence. “And then she showed you. And just like me, you were unable cope with what you saw.”

The jailer had come in then, just as Ralph pushed Arabella away in disgust.

“You are a viper,” he said, unable to stop his voice from shaking. “A viper.”

He had turned, almost blinded by his rage and left the jail without looking back. Arabella’s words had still haunted him, especially late at night on the edges of sleep, when all he could think about was Frances’ face, crumbling with sadness, on the day she had left. Recalling the encounter was painful, and as Ralph sat in his study on that September morning with Holton by his side, he wondered if the pain of it would ever truly dull, or if he would be seared by it forever.



“The second letter is from your nephew,” Holton said, drawing Ralph back to the present moment.

Holton held out a thick, creamy card with a blue lace trim. Ralph gestured listlessly for Holton to read it out. Holton frowned at his master’s lack of zeal but obeyed.

“It announces the upcoming marriage of Lord Philip Adley to... Baroness Hyacinth-Gabrielle de Rothschild, of the Rothschild’s of Paris.”

“I know them.” Ralph shook his head distastefully. They were a well-known wealthy banking dynasty. Philip was very fortunate to have secured a Rothschild. “He’s has only been on the continent a month!”

“Well, now that his mother is in jail, he has complete control of his own financial decisions,” Holton shrugged. “I imagine such a match would be most expedient.”

“Yes, and now he has found his way to tie himself to the purse strings

of another wealthy woman.” Ralph sighed, rubbing his hand over his face. “He doesn’t expect me to attend this union, does he?”

“He does not, though you are formally invited, of course.” Holton pulled a second page from behind the invitation. “He writes to inform you of the wedding and also to ask your blessing -,”

“I cannot bless him, but I shall pray for the Baroness de Rothschild,” Ralph said ungenerously.

“- not of his union, of his plans for his mother.”

“What of her?” Ralph spun his chair back round to face the window, trying to hide his displeasure at having Arabella mentioned.

“He has concerns, given the eminence of his new union with the Baroness, that his mother’s criminal actions might reflect badly on his new marriage. He has asked for your permission to send his mother to the Americas. Apparently, he has a contact there who has suggested she attend him there.”

“In what capacity?” Ralph said. “She will bring potential turmoil to any man.”

“Lord Philip does not give specifics,” Holton frowned, examining the letter. “He assures us that his friend will keep her out of trouble and busy -”

“And most importantly, away from everyone I love and care about,” Ralph finished, sighing. “Write to him, congratulate him if you must, and tell him I relinquish all interest in my sister. He can send her to Australia for all I care. As long as she stays far away from me.”

“Yes, sir.” Holton offered him the next missive. “There is a letter from Lady Matilda. Will you read it?”

Ralph rubbed his eyes painfully. He brutally missed his daughter, missed her laughter and the scent of her hair. He didn’t think he could bear to read her words on paper.

“What does she say?”

Holton took it back and examined it carefully, unable to help a smile tugging at his lips when he read Matilda's words.

"She says that she is well, that she enjoys school." Holton laughed. "She says she has learnt to jump a pony, and that she has been writing to Miss Frances -,"

"Thank you, Holton, that is enough, I - I shall read it later."

Ralph pinched his fingers to the bridge of his nose, fighting to hold back his tears. Just hearing her words was too overwhelming for him.

"You did the right thing, sir, sending her away to school," Holton said softly. "It had become too much for her, living here after seeing your illness, what happened with your sister, and then losing Miss Frances -,"

"I know." Ralph bit the words out, but they did nothing to comfort him.

Holton was correct, of course, Matilda had been traumatised by the events that had taken place, and once Frances had left had been inconsolable. Ralph could see that Sinclair Manor was at risk of becoming a house of pain and sadness for Matilda too, and had seen the necessity of Matilda having experiences outside of her family seat. Still, it had pained him brutally to say goodbye to her, especially so soon after watching Frances disappear. Ralph couldn't help it. He felt an overwhelming rush of sadness and wrenching anger:

Why did she have to deceive me? Why?

"Are you alright, sir?"

"Yes, Holton." Ralph squeezed his eyes tightly closed and breathed out slowly through his nose. "Is that all?"

"No, sir."

Holton was clearly taking the rare opportunity of Ralph agreeing to go through his correspondence, and quickly moved on to the next letter. Ralph kept his eyes closed, trying to pull his feelings back into check. More and more recently he struggled to maintain his emotional

equilibrium. Since Lowenna had died it was like he was he had been walking around numb to the world. Now, since Frances had come into his life it was as if he was feeling everything at the highest amplification possible. For a while, he had felt truly alive but now she was gone, he only felt empty and wounded.

“This is an invitation to a ball -,”

“No.”

“This is a request for your presence at a shooting party in Derby -,”

“No.”

“This is an engagement announcement for - oh, never mind - this is a letter from your art dealer -”

“Wait.” Ralph’s eyes flew open and he looked at Holton shrewdly. “What was the engagement announcement?”

“Um... well,” Holton shifted uncomfortably and then read aloud, “Baron Fortescue requests your attendance at the engagement party of his daughter, Miss Frances Fortescue and Lord Martin Hart.”

Ralph stared at Holton. The silence stretched between them.

“Is there a note?” Ralph asked finally.

“There is, in addition to the invitation.” Holton set the engagement announcement on the desk and then handed him the additional note hesitantly. Ralph’s heart lurched when he saw it was written on familiar Fortescue headed paper.

“It is from the Baron.”

Ralph felt a crushing disappointment that it wasn’t from Frances, but then scolded himself for even wishing it was. Breathing heavily, he read aloud:

My dear Duke,

I thank you for your hospitality toward my daughter. I hope I can return

your kindness by hosting you at her upcoming engagement party.

With gratitude,

Baron Fortescue.

"I think not." Ralph sharply crumpled the note in his fist and tossed it into the fire, glaring at the invitation that remained objectionably. He considered throwing it into the fire too, but thought it was perhaps too ungenerous. Also, Matilda might want to know of the details when Holton wrote to her on Ralph's behalf.

"Shall I send a note, sir?" Holton asked gently. Ralph was grateful that his friend did not assume in any way there was a possibility of him attending the occasion. The pain would be unbearable.

"If you think it appropriate."

"I do, sir." Holton was soft-spoken but he felt the kind rebuke in his words. "Miss Fortescue was a kind and generous house guest."

"Then send a note."

"What should it say, sir?"

"Well, I would steer away from anything pertaining to how his daughter manipulated my feelings and broke me down, or how Lord Hart doesn't know the depths of deception his new wife is capable of, or the depths of - of passion -"

Ralph lost his thought for a moment, consumed by the memory of Frances pressed against him, her body quick and warm under his hands. Holton looked at him in concern as Ralph fought to regain his temper.

"Just tell him that we wish them well," Ralph finished.

"And do we, sir?" Holton asked softly. "Wish them well?"

"No." Ralph laughed humourlessly, trying to disguise his feeling of despair. "But I no longer wish Lord Hart ill, so that must be called progress."

“And Miss Fortescue, sir?”

“Don’t push me, Holton.” Ralph glared at his friend; his flaring rage too close to the surface to be contained. “She betrayed me, in perhaps the worst possible way. I thought she was an angel, a saint sent to rescue me and, in the end... well, no one would blame me for wishing her ill.”

But you don’t, a sly voice inside Ralph countered. *You miss her like half of you have been ripped away. How can you wish part of your own heart ill?*

Ralph groaned and turned his chair away from Holton.

“Thank you, Holton.”

Holton looked at his master with pity. He looked ragged, frankly awful. He had not shaved in weeks and was generally unkempt, his dark hair and beard making him resemble a mad man. Since his illness, he had taken to wearing his housecoat around the manor, instead of taking the time to dress formally. Mrs Bury fretted over his diminishing appetite, and he seemed to be subsiding mostly on whisky, tea and cigars. His doctor came regularly and pronounced that he was, in fact, returned to fighting health, but Holton knew better. He knew that his master’s torment had reached a breaking point. Hesitating, Holton withdrew a small leather book from his jacket and set it on the desk.

“Even the saints began as sinners, Your Grace,” he said, watching as Ralph slowly turned to look at the leather-bound diary that sat on his desk.

Despite the embossed stamp of the Fortescue family crest upon it, Ralph still asked, “What is that?”

“I found it when I was having Miss Frances’ things packed. It was under the bed.” Holton hesitated. “I believe it is her journal.”

Ralph’s fingers twitched on the arm of his chair, but he did not move. He looked up at Holton slowly.

“You have read it?”

Holton nodded reluctantly.

"That is quite an invasion of privacy, Holton," Ralph moved his fingers slowly across the desk, stopping within a centimetre of the leather cover. "What did you uncover? Are her true nefarious motives laid out in there? All the ways she anticipated manipulating me?"

"That was not my purpose in reading it, sir," Holton said. "I did not read it for further confirmation of Miss Fortescue's character - I already know exactly who she is. I read it in the hope that I might find within it something to convince you of what I know to be true."

"And what is that?" Ralph asked sarcastically. Holton blinked slightly at his tone but even though his dark eyes flashed a slight warning at Ralph for his rudeness, he spoke regularly.

"That Miss Fortescue is a woman of great character, bravery, endearment and loyalty," Holton said, simply. "I have known it for many months, but especially since I saw the look on her face when I rode to fetch her back from the post. Nothing she has said since could deter me from these conclusions."

"Not even the terrible things she said to me?" Ralph spoke harshly, but Holton was unmoved.

"Nothing she has said since could deter me," Holton repeated.

Ralph couldn't help but feel enraged by his friend's response. How could he maintain such a high opinion of a woman who had utterly broken his heart? Still, Ralph could never fault Holton for his perception. He valued his friend's intelligence far too highly to do that. Grudgingly, he slowly pulled the diary toward him.

"Did you find it?" he asked Holton. "Evidence of what you know to be true?"

"I did," Holton nodded. "I witnessed the transformation of a girl into a woman within those pages. Of a child with a childish fancy, a notion of courtship that was more akin to chasing boys around a school yard and tricking them into kisses than the preparations a lady makes for a great match -"

"She did have a great match in mind," Ralph muttered, unable to stop

himself tracing Frances insignia on the first page.

"She became a lady of nuance, and insight, who - I still believe - held you in the highest regard."

"Your argument is that she changed her goals?" Ralph looked his friend in the eye defiantly. "Does it make the goal itself less reprehensible?"

"We all make mistakes in youth, sir," Holton said gently. "We should not be held accountable for them our whole lives long."

"Should we not?" Ralph mused, flicking through the pages but seeing none of the words. In his mind's eye, he saw his wife over and over, heard her rebukes and felt her shame.

"No, sir."

Holton voice was so sharp, and Ralph looked up, surprised to see his old friend leaning over him, hands firmly set on the desk and his bright eyes blazing with intensity.

"You must forgive yourself for your youthful indiscretions, my friend. You were young, you made mistakes, but you have paid for them."

Ralph's heart constricted at Holton's words. He felt the possibility of relief in them, the sweet opportunity for freedom, but also his mind rebelled against it. *I deserve to pay*, he told himself. *I deserve to pay, every day, for the rest of my life.*

"How could recompense ever be made to a dead woman?" Ralph spoke hoarsely, his hand trembling as he held the journal in his hand.

"With a life lived well, Wynter." Holton grasped his friend's wrist tightly, comforting Ralph with his warm touch. "Lowenna did not die at your hand, and yet you have paid for her death over and over in your own grief, your own self-flagellation, but also in your own transformation. You are a loving father, a responsible master, a kind brother and you would be a faithful husband, given the chance."

"I do not trust myself," Ralph gulped back tears, his whole body shaking with the grief and pain of his flaws.

“It does not matter,” Holton gripped Ralph’s shoulder tightly and looked down at the journal between them. “She trusts you. If you can forgive yourself, and forgive her, she has enough trust for the both of you.”

The two men looked into each other’s eyes until Ralph could bear it no more.

“I do not know that I can,” he said haltingly, averting his eyes in shame. What kind of man was he, that he was unable to do this most basic, most human of things - forgive himself and others?

“I do.”

Holton smiled at him gently, his eyes filled with respect and kindness. He reached for the journal and flipped to the back pages, setting them down before his master.

“Read her letter to you, then make your decision.”

Ralph nodded, unable to speak. Then, as Holton walked to the door, intending to give Ralph some privacy, Ralph found his words, “Thank you, Barty.”

“You are welcome, Wynter.” Holton smiled at his oldest friend, his best companion, and the man he respected most in the world. “You deserve a second chance, my friend. You both do.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

*M*y dearest love,

Ralph, Wynter, Duke of my heart, there is much you don't know about me. You don't know the darkest parts of me, since I have tried to hide them from you for so long: my selfishness, my unkindness, my ability to put my own material needs about the feelings and cares of others. I have tried to hide these parts of myself since all I have wanted, nearly from the moment I saw you, was to be the woman you deserved. Since I arrived in your home, I have attempted to be the kind of woman you might find attractive, might find compelling, and then, over time I realised I was essentially altering my being.

My only desire was to be worthy of you; to emulate your generosity and kindness, your high moral standards and honesty. As I grew, and as I have changed, I have come to recognise and revile more of those flaws in my character that so controlled me when we first met. How much I have longed to rip out those selfish parts of me, the immature parts of me that I now so abhor! Sometimes, I have wished that the bad parts of myself were physically manifested, for then perhaps they could be cut away, with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, instead of lingering inside of me, needing to be always kept in check.

Ralph couldn't help but reflect on his own desire to hide his darkness from Frances. How often had he wished that the darkness in him could be removed? Yet when he had revealed himself fully, how releasing and freeing it had felt. He felt a sudden wave of guilt that he had not been able to return that favour to Frances; when she had revealed the ugliest parts of her character, he had not embraced her, but turned away.

What you have done for me is far more than a simple reformation of character. What you do not know about me is that since the death of my

mother, part of me has been locked away inside. It is perhaps the part of me that feels most deeply and loves most keenly. After her death, the pain I felt was so immense and all-consuming, I believe I simply closed that part of myself that could love like that and thus, be hurt so cruelly. It seemed expedient in my young mind, perhaps a way of protecting myself from further harm, but I did not know what damage it could do to my character.

Consequently, I have grown up deficient of some essential part of my heart. I have received undying love from my father, and yet I have never quite been able to respond in kind. I did not know until I met you that I had been living my life with part of me missing. It is the part of me that can love with a whole heart, can put others needs above my own, and compassionately give all of myself in the service of others. I do not know how else to explain it, my dear, except that it feels as if you have found the keys to those locked rooms inside me and opened all the doors.

Ralph closed his eyes for a moment, the tears rolling softly down his cheeks. He had known Frances was capable of immense depth of thought and feeling, but he had never known how eloquent she could be when she put pen to paper. It was as if his heart was being cut apart and offered up to him on the page. He recognised his own feelings in every word she wrote, and it was destroying him.

I understand your reasons for dismissing me - and encouraging me towards Lord Hart - as ever, you only think of my reputation, and I am grateful for your conscientious friendship. Is it wrong for me to say that I continue to hope for more, despite all that has been said between us already? I know your reasons for fearing an attachment to me, but I can never agree with what you have said about yourself.

You said you would not be a constant husband, that you would stray from me, as you strayed from your last wife. I do not believe it. How can I believe you to be faithless, Wynter, when all you have shown me is faithfulness? Despite all my flaws, despite being young and immature and difficult, you have never wavered in your kindness toward me. I believe that we can be better people for each other, my love, and I shall always believe that.

“Can we?” Ralph wondered aloud, staring at her words. “Can we really be better?”

How he wanted to believe her, he could feel his whole being and soul straining to believe it, and yet some darkness inside still held him

back. *She is far braver than I*, he realised, looking down at her bold, uncompromising words. He took a deep breath and carried on.

It is perhaps not possible to truly comprehend the scope of one person's love for another, until one is faced with the threat of losing their love, but your illness has given me this one true gift: Now I know that I shall love you for all my life and after it, and that wherever you are my love will continue to burn as long as your heart beats. It has been a miracle to me to lie by your side and hear the blood pumping through your body, to know that you are alive, so dearly alive, and that is all I need in this life.

For you to live, my darling, and for me to love you.

Your ever-constant friend,

Frances

“Sir?”

There was a knock on the door and Ralph hurriedly wiped his face, sniffing loudly. Holton stuck his head around, frowning to see his master's distress but then noticing the book open in front of him and smiling in understanding.

“I know this might not be a good time, but the Prince Regent is here.”

“Damn a good time!” George's voice boomed forth on the other side of the door, pushing it fully open with a crash. “I'm here to see my friend!”

Ralph didn't have time to compose himself or slip the diary out of sight before George had strolled into the room with a large box of cigars and sat himself in a chair by Ralph's fireplace, helping himself eagerly to the cigar cutter.

“We'll have some brandy, Holton, if you'll be so kind,” George looked up from his task to assess his friend briefly. “And perhaps a pork pie for Wynter here, he looks done in.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Holton said, repressing a grin of satisfaction as he backed out of the room. The Prince's timing was fortuitous. With any luck, his master was on the cusp of re-thinking his feelings

towards Miss Fortescue. At a time like this what a man needed was a plan, and if any man could concoct a plan to win back a lady's heart, it was the heir apparent to the throne of England.

"What are you doing here, George?" Ralph asked, staring at the next king of England in amazement.

"I am, at present, cutting you an excellent cigar, but as for my purpose here I suppose you might call it a mission of mercy."

"Is that so?"

"The gossip all over town is that you've completely lost your mind! It seems they might be correct for once." George looked up briefly from his task and ran his eyes over his friend critically. "I was not aware that beards had come back into fashion."

"Neither was I." Ralph ran his hand ruefully over his hairy face.

"Come and sit by the fire, you look as pale as death."

George gestured to the chair opposite him as if Ralph was a guest in his study and not the other way around. Ralph rose, forgetting that he still held Frances' journal in his hands, and sat heavily down across from his friend. George handed him a lit cigar wordlessly and they puffed together companionably, until Holton had returned with their drinks and food.

"To your good health, Your Majesty," Ralph said, lifting his brandy glass.

"To yours, I think, Wynter." George raised his eyebrows over the rim of his glass. "You look like you need it more than I."

They sipped and George assessed his friend carefully, his sharp eyes clearly showing the quick calculations of his mind.

"Good reading, is it?" He pointed his cigar toward Frances' journal.

"Not really," Ralph confessed.

"Hmm." George blew a smoke ring and crossed his legs, one shining

boot jiggling with intense thought. "I have always found my ladies' diaries exceptionally good reading, I shall be frank, except for my wife's. That one is pure tedium. Though I am sure she would say the same of mine."

"You keep a diary, George?" Ralph was surprised. He had not considered that his friend, though of utmost importance for the nation, was a particularly introspective man.

"Well, a book of sorts." George winked at him. "Battle notes, really. Sins and conquests and all that."

"Of course." Ralph chuckled and shook his head. As surprised as he was to see his friend, he couldn't help but be glad of his presence. George nodded smartly at his laugh, as if it was the cue he had been waiting for.

"Well you are clearly still in your wits, despite rumours to the contrary, and taking on the appearance of a common beggar, so I must make other conclusions." He looked significantly at the diary. "So is it love, then?"

"I think it might be," Ralph spoke hesitantly, then, looking down at the words still scrawled elegantly on the page he had just read, said definitely, "Yes. Yes, I think it is."

"I see." The Prince Regent blew another smoke ring, considering. "Quite a thing, that. And she returns your affections?"

"All evidence suggests so." Ralph tapped his finger against the leather cover.

"I see." George nodded slowly and then looked his friend square in the eye. "The only question remains then, is what in the blazes are you going to do about it, man? Why are you shut up in here wallowing when you could be out there, winning her back?"

"I - I don't know," Ralph stuttered. "I - I am not sure I should do anything."

"What?" George jumped to his feet, spilling cigar ash on the carpet. "What might possess you to come to such a conclusion - when a filly like that - looks at you the way she does -"

George stopped pacing and looked at Ralph significantly. Ralph blushed. Clearly Frances' partiality toward him had been noted at the ball.

“– and professes the kind of love that makes a man weep as you clearly have been doing –,”

“I have not been weeping!” Ralph protested, ignoring the way George rolled his eyes. “Besides, she is to be engaged presently.”

He gestured to the hateful engagement announcement that still sat on his desk.

“To Lord Hart - ought I to interfere with his happiness?”

“Absolutely, when it interferes with your own!” George exclaimed. “Besides, Martin is a fine fellow who won't struggle for another match. I only threw her in his path to pique your jealousy, my friend. You might inconvenience him mildly, but you shall not interfere with his overall happiness, of that I am sure. I have another young lady already waiting in the wings for him.”

“You did what?” Ralph shouted, shocked by the Prince Regent's endless capability to interfere in the romantic lives of his court.

“One must fight for one's love, Wynter, or it is barely love at all!” George said, as if that explained everything, and then picked up his glass of brandy, downing the contents in one.

“Now, we must get to work! Holton!”

“Yes, Your Majesty?” Holton appeared as quickly as ghost, his face expectant for more instructions. Ralph could see that Holton had been hoping this was exactly what George might do and couldn't help but laugh a little at the combination of his two closest friends rallying to get him back on his feet.

“I suppose you have a grand plan for some extreme romantic gesture, George.” Ralph smiled up his friend, taking another restorative sip of his brandy. “Let's hear it.”

“Well it's relatively simple, my friend.” He clapped Ralph on the

shoulder and looked deep into his eyes. “Do you want her back?”

This time, Ralph didn't hesitate. Frances' words had settled on his heart and his love for her, which had never died but only been hidden under a shroud of pain, flamed back into life.

“Yes.”

“Capital,” George grinned down at his friend and turned to Holton. “That's step one taken care of. Holton, for step two we are going to require a barber.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Oh Frances, you look beautiful!” Catherine sighed as she helped Frances pin a navy-blue ribbon into her hair.

“Thank you.”

Frances turned her head to the side admiring the way the navy-blue ribbon looked against her red hair, and how it was perfectly set against the creamy pearls at her ears and throat.

“What do you think of the dress?” Frances asked, rising from the vanity to look at her reflection in her long bedroom mirror. The autumn chill had picked up and she had decided upon a long-sleeved navy gown, with a slight puff at the shoulder and a scooping that showed off the elegance of her neckline and flattered her chest perfectly.

“Your gown is most suitable for an engagement party,” Catherine commented, eyeing her friend critically and pointing to Frances’ neck. “But you do need something to cover that.”

Frances self-consciously touched her throat where the pink line of her scar was faintly visible.

“Perhaps a necklace?”

Catherine nodded and reached for Frances’ jewellery box. It was a testament to their friendship that when Frances had finally told Catherine how she had received the scar, she had not expressed shock or dismay, only sweetness and they had never breathed a word of it again.

“These will do nicely.”

Catherine lifted out a length of pearls that she doubled up, setting them around her friend's throat. Frances lifted her curling red hair to let it the double string of pearls settle on her collarbone.

"They are lovely," Catherine said, pressing down on her friends' shoulders. "Did they belong to your mother?"

"They did." Frances touched them reverently. "I have not really worn them before."

"Well, they are the jewels of a woman, not a girl." Catherine smiled softly. "She would surely be proud of you today."

Frances nodded thankfully at her friend but couldn't answer. She was not certain her mother would be proud of her. How would her mother feel about her daughter binding her life to a man she knew was not the love of her life?

"We should go downstairs and find your father." Catherine draped a cream shawl over Frances' shoulders. "Your guests shall be arriving soon."

Frances nodded. Catherine looked at her tenderly, cocking her head to one side.

"You still miss him, don't you?" she asked.

"Every day." Frances held her friends' gaze in the mirror, and then focused on adjusting her shawl. "But I have made my decision, and it is the right one for everyone. I will build a loving family with Lord Hart and make my father proud."

"I am sure he is already proud," Catherine smiled. "Let us go."

Frances followed her friend from the room, trying to push down the unexpected feeling of dread that she felt at the prospect of attending her own engagement party.

"I have a secret to tell you," Catherine whispered as they walked along the landing towards the stairs.

"Oh?"

“Yes,” Catherine’s eyes darted down to her hand which was resting significantly against her stomach.

Frances gasped and stopped in her tracks, grabbing her best friend’s arm. She had been so wrapped up in thinking about Ralph, she hadn’t immediately noticed that Catherine’s thickening waistline and plumper, glowing face.

“Catherine, are you -?”

“Yes,” Catherine nodded, her eyes shining brightly. “I am with child.”

“What wonderful news!” Frances hugged her friend tightly, appreciating then the slight firmness of her protruding stomach.

“It is,” Catherine laughed joyously. “I can only hope the same happiness for you, Frances. I know it hasn’t been easy for you to leave the Duke behind, but I believe you can find happiness with Lord Hart, if you try. Then we can raise our children together!”

Frances nodded enthusiastically but could not muster it inside her. The thought of enduring pregnancy and childbearing, to raise a child that did not bear Ralph’s eyes, or his hair, was distressing. She took a deep breath and descended the stairs, seeing her father and Lord Hart standing at the bottom in the hallway.

“My dear Frances!” Her father beamed up at her as the servants scurried around him, preparing and rushing between the parlour and the kitchen. “You look beautiful!”

“You do, Miss Frances.” Lord Hart bowed to her with all expected gentility, but it still felt strange to hear her fiancé not call her by her first name. She remembered the way that Ralph had spoken her name, and then was suddenly overwhelmed with the memory of his deep voice against her neck growling “*My sweet Frances*,” so that his words reverberated down to her bones. Frances tried not to flush as she curtsied to Lord Hart.

“You also, Lord Hart,” she said. “Shall we go to the parlour and greet our guests?”

Lord Hart nodded and took her by the arm. Together they walked into the parlour. Already a few people were assembled, lord and ladies of

the Ton gathered in their finery. Frances noticed the way that their eyes glanced towards her, she saw the respect and admiration there. She knew that they made a fine-looking pair, but she could feel no pleasure from it.

Even when she noticed Amelia standing in a corner, her face souring as she saw how well Frances looked and how handsome and eligible Lord Hart was compared to the Marquess Huntley, Frances could feel no accomplishment. There was no glory to be had in this, and no joy in it either. The only consolation Frances could find was that at least now she knew she was doing the right thing. She did not have Ralph, but she did not deserve him. At least now everything was in its rightful place, even if it felt as if the whole world was tilted out of order.

“Will Baron and Baroness Hart be attending today?” Frances asked, as Lord Hart steered her to a quieter corner and handed her a glass of champagne.

“My father shall,” Lord Hart answered. “My mother shall not. The journey is too long from Derbyshire for her. However, she looks forward to meeting you next month.”

Frances’ stomach cramped painfully at the thought. She knew that the Hart ancestral estate was in the Peak District, hundreds of miles away from home, but she was not sure if she felt ready to transfer to the northern Hart stronghold. Still, it was what she had to do in order to become Lord Hart’s wife.

“Well, I hope your father enjoys the occasion,” Frances said.

“I am sure he will,” Lord Hart replied.

Frances noticed how his eyes were drifting around the room. She saw the way he cast friendly smiles at the flirtatious ladies standing close by and knew that she had not captured Lord Hart’s heart. She was not surprised to see his gaze wander and it didn’t hurt her at all. She knew he was far too honourable to ever betray her, and any indiscretions in their marriage would be hidden from view, but she felt a sort of slow resignation at these thoughts. He would never love her, and she would never love him, but at least they would never be truly capable of breaking each other’s hearts. Frances found that despite her acceptance she was struggling to catch her breath.

“Excuse me, Lord Hart,” she said, handing him back her champagne glass.

“Is everything alright, Miss Frances?” He looked at her with genuine concern in his eyes. He was a kind man; he would always be attentive. That should be enough for her, but Frances felt as if the room had suddenly become too small.

“Yes,” she nodded quickly. “I just need to speak to my father about something.”

She quickly walked out of the front parlour and into the back conservatory of the house, taking deep breaths and she held her body tightly, staring out over the back garden. The sun was shining on the golden leaves, but dark clouds seemed to be gathering. It was typical English autumnal weather; hopefully the sunshine would hold for the party and the guests could enjoy the tables and parasols the servants had set up on the front lawn with croquet. She just needed a moment to gather her thoughts and push away all thoughts of Ralph, before she returned to the party. She closed her eyes and breathed out slowly, allowing herself only a second to imagine Ralph’s smile as he laughed at something, she said during one of their morning rides. Just thinking of it calmed her down, but the relief was short lived.

“Frances?”

She turned and saw her father standing in the doorway, smiling gently.

“Is everything alright, my dear?”

“Yes, Father.”

She tried to smile at him, but she knew it was unconvincing. He looked at her gently for a moment and then closed the door behind him, giving them the privacy of the small, warm conservatory.

“Are you having second thoughts, my dear?” he asked, coming beside her and slipping a warm hand on her back.

“No, of course not,” Frances shook her head. “I am sure I am doing the right thing.”

“Hmm.”

Her father tapped a finger to his chin thoughtfully. Frances couldn't help but smile at his expressions. He had always taken the time to speak to her, to listen to her and nurture her throughout her childhood. He had been her only companion for a long time, and she had never thanked him. She unconsciously squeezed his hand tightly.

“It is very respectable of you to do the right thing,” her father said slowly, “but I do not think most young ladies would say that is their reason for marrying a man.”

“Why not?”

“It sounds terribly practical, my dear!” Her father laughed.

“Is it not good to be practical in a marriage?” Frances asked, holding her elbows tightly, staring out at the green grass.

“I am sure it is helpful, in many cases.” Her father nodded kindly. “But you have never been a particularly practical girl, I have to say.”

“Well, perhaps I am becoming a practical woman.” Frances shifted uncomfortably.

“Perhaps.”

Her father shrugged, also gazing out on the grass. Even though Frances was uncomfortable, she felt was still pleased with her father's approach to their conversations. He was always accepting and never pushed too far.

“I have always thought that you were more like your mother, however,” her father said, quietly. “She was always more romantic than practical.”

Frances was surprised to hear her father say that. After all, they did not often talk about her mother. She found her mind bubbling with a thousand questions as she found herself skimming through memories of her mother and father's relationship, trying to consider what might have suggested to her that her mother had once been 'romantic'.

Finally, she asked, "Was Mama your first love?"

Her father looked at her in surprise and then smiled intensely.

"She was." His face was filled with the gentleness of memories past. "She was indeed."

"How did you meet?"

"At a ball, like many young couples." Her father laughed to himself. "I was stunned by her beauty! There were many suitors vying for her hand, so I knew I had to move quickly. I immediately asked her for the next two dances on her card."

"And she accepted? Did she feel the same way about you do you think?"

"Did she think I was handsome?" Her father chuckled. "I imagine she thought I was quite bumbling and a poor dancer, but I did make her laugh."

"No, I meant - were you her first love?"

"Yes." Her father shifted his feet, taking on a somehow younger stance as he drifted back in time to when his wife was still alive, and they were young in love together. "Neither of us had ever loved in the same way before, though I know she had another suitor at the time."

"She did?"

Frances wondered how her mother had felt, if she had considered whether it was the right thing to break her commitment to her other suitor. Did she feel a pull between duty and true love?

"But she chose you, Father," Frances said, slipping her hand into the crook of her father's arm. "Did she ever say why?"

"You don't believe that I was simply the more dazzling option?" her father said comically, lifting his eyebrows at her. Frances smiled.

"I believe she chose me because she loved me," her father said. "Because I loved her with my whole heart. Something that people

used to say about us was that when she came in the room, she filled up my whole vision.”

There's no one but you, Frances.

Ralph's words came back to her, hitting her like a ton of bricks. She closed her eyes briefly against the memory, but it was not enough, she couldn't help the way her throat tightened, and she couldn't catch her breath.

“Are you alright, sweetheart?”

“Yes, Papa.” Frances accidentally slipped back into her more girlish endearment for her father, blinking as she stared out at the lawn. “It is only... only that we rarely talk of Mama.”

“I know.” His voice was laced with regret and he patted her hand tenderly. “But as a child you never wanted to talk about her, it was almost as if when she died you stopped being able to. I never wanted to force you... I always knew you would find your way to being able to ask me about her.”

“Yes.” Frances nodded, swallowing back her tears and fears. “I wish that I had not been that way. It is only recently I have understood how much of my heart I closed off.”

“I see.”

Her father nodded knowledgeably, and Frances thought that maybe he did see. Maybe he felt similarly after his wife's death.

“Well, my dear, I can only be honest about your mother. The truth is that she married me because she loved me, even if she wasn't sure it was the right thing to do.”

He smiled softly to himself, glancing out of the window.

“That is part of love, my dear. Trusting the other person enough to love them, despite your doubts.”

Frances tried to nod, but she was overwhelmed with her emotions and was fighting especially hard just to remain standing up and not

sobbing. She could not forget Ralph's words to her: *When we are together, we can face any fear*. Ralph had loved her as intensely as her parents had loved one another. Finally, she was able to speak.

"But... but people do - do not always marry for love, do they Father?" she asked tremulously. "And - and they are happy?"

"They are." He nodded, squeezing her arm. "They can be. Sometimes love comes later. That - that might be the case for you, my dear."

He looked at her with tenderness in his blue eyes.

"Just because you do not feel for Lord Hart what I felt for your mother, does not mean you will not be happy," he said softly, but then his gaze was caught by the door opening behind them. "Yes?" He asked the servant who apologetically stuck their head around the door.

"I'm sorry, Baron, but there is someone here -," her gaze darted to Frances and then back to her father. "- asking after the Miss Frances. He says its important."

Frances moved automatically toward the door, but her father stopped her.

"Let me attend to this, my dear," he said, stroking her arm gently. "You gather yourself, and then return to your guests. It is your day."

Frances nodded, and watched as her father left. She turned back to the window, letting her breath out slowly and trying to settle herself. It was only after a few moments that she began to wonder who might be asking for her.

He says it's important.

Her heart jolted in realisation. There was only one man she knew who would demand her presence like that. In a rush and a gasp, she rushed to the door.

Chapter Twenty-four

*B*aron Andrew Fortescue closed the door behind his daughter to see Lord Hart looking curiously toward him from the door of the parlour. He raised a glass of champagne toward the Baron and stepped carefully away from the group.

“Is all well with the Miss Fortescue?” Lord Hart asked quietly.

“Oh yes.” Andrew nodded, reassuring Lord Hart. “She is only a little emotional that her mother cannot be here on this special day.”

“Of course.”

Andrew saw that Lord Hart was not very concerned for his daughter. He was polite, of course, but Andrew could tell there was no real connection on Lord Hart’s part.

“Well, I am happy to hold up the fort out here for now, until she is ready.”

Andrew nodded, noticing the maid fidgeting nearby.

“Excuse me, Lord Hart, I have a matter to take care of. Thank you for holding the fort.”

Lord Hart smiled generously and returned to the parlour, and Andrew noticed how easily he moved back amongst people and how well he was received by the company. Andrew could feel how Frances would be advanced by becoming Lady Hart, how she would progress in society, be treated well and always be well cared for by the Hart family, long after he was gone, but Andrew couldn’t deny a small niggles of doubt. Andrew sighed and turned to the maid.

“Who is here?”

“He is out on the front lawn, sir.”

The maid nodded to where some of the guests were clustered around the small tea tables and parasols to protect ladies from the sun. Andrew followed where the maid was looking and was startled by what he saw. The Duke of Sinclair stood away from the other guests, pacing on the lawn. He seemed thinner than the last time the Baron had seen him, no doubt due his recent illness, but he also seemed fervent and feverish in his actions, as if he didn't really feel like he should be at the event.

“He will not come in, sir,” the maid shrugged helplessly. “He says he only wants to speak to Miss Fortescue.”

“Let me manage this, thank you.”

Andrew dismissed the maid and walked out onto the grand lawn of the Fortescue estate, smiling encouragingly to his guests and waving to the most prestigious attendees. The Duke stopped pacing as he approached, nodding respectfully as Andrew stopped in front of him.

“Your Grace, we are honoured by your presence,” Andrew said, bowing to the younger but much more powerful man.

“I was honoured by your invitation.” The Duke looked over Andrew's shoulder, his dark eyes searching the front of the house carefully. Suddenly, another much more impressive gentleman appeared at his side. Andrew immediately bowed his head towards the Prince Regent.

“Your Majesty, you grace us with your presence today.”

Andrew had of course extended an invitation to the Prince Regent, especially since he had been so instrumental in introducing Lord Hart to the Fortescue family, but he had never expected that their small party would be fortunate enough to be blessed by the Prince Regent's presence.

“Thank you, Baron.” The Prince Regent nodded for Andrew to rise, and looked across the lawn eagerly towards a group of young ladies sending excited glances his way. “I happened to be staying with Wynter here and thought I might tag along.”

“You are most welcome.” Andrew gestured towards the ladies by the croquet lawn. “Shall I make introductions, Your Majesty?”

“Do not trouble yourself, Baron, I am... already acquainted.” He clapped the Duke on the shoulder. “Unto the breach!”

Andrew wondered what he might mean by that, but then the Prince winked like the rogue he was and bowed elegantly before excusing himself to walk towards the lawn. The Duke and Andrew were left alone, and an awkward silence fell. If the Duke really did want a private audience with Frances, he would certainly have to ask for it in person, like a man.

“I must thank you personally for being so hospitable to my daughter,” Andrew said, trying to start the conversation.

“No, it is I who should be thanking you.” The Duke caught Andrew’s eyes and he saw the sincerity there. “I am sure you know that she nursed me back from the brink of death.”

Andrew hadn’t been aware of this. When Frances had delayed her return home after the ball by a few days on account of the Duke’s ill health, she had led her father to believe she had been caring for the Duke’s daughter. Andrew felt a small seed of doubt growing in his heart. He was unsure why his daughter had misled him, but he felt it wouldn’t be appropriate to ask outright.

“I know my daughter is grateful for the friendship of your daughter,” Andrew said carefully, and noticed how the Duke smiled, almost instinctively.

“Yes, Matilda is besotted with Frances.” The Duke laughed softly. “She had told me that she is writing to Frances from school. They are keen friends.”

Andrew was surprised to hear the Duke use his daughter’s familiar name. He smiled carefully.

“Frances has enjoyed corresponding with your daughter. I hope they will continue to write to one another when Frances relocates to Derbyshire.”

“Derbyshire?” The Duke’s eyes widened. “Why - why would she go

there?"

"That is the seat of the ancestral Hart family home," Andrew watched the Duke's face carefully as he heard this news. He couldn't help but notice a slight paling of the pallor and a twitch about the jaw. "She will visit there next month and stay until the wedding at Christmas."

"I see." The Duke averted his gaze. "That sounds ... most proper."

It was an odd thing to say, and the Duke seemed to know it. He focused his gaze on the front of the house, clearly searching for someone. Andrew wondered if it was his daughter.

"Will you not come inside and join the celebration?" Andrew gestured back inside the house, but the Duke stepped back, lifting his hands.

"No, no, I - I should not want to disturb." Andrew thought it was more likely that the Duke did not want to see Lord Hart and Andrew felt he could guess why. "I would only like to speak with your daughter. Privately, if possible."

His words confirmed it. Andrew could see that this man, in all his finery, had a partiality for his daughter and he had chosen this moment, the day of his daughter's engagement party. He considered the Duke carefully.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Your Grace?"

Before the Duke could answer, an angry cry came from behind Andrew.

"Father!"

They turned to see Frances striding across the lawn towards them both, her face a picture of angry irritation.

"Frances, the Duke of Sinclair -" Andrew began, but Frances wasn't looking at him. His daughter stood by his side and immediately addressed the Duke with a level of familiarity that both shocked her father but also confirmed something he was starting to realise deep down inside.

“What are you doing here?” Frances asked, folding her arms angrily across her chest.

“I am here to see you.”

Andrew watched the Duke’s face with interest. He noticed how Lord Wynter’s mouth had softened, how his body had relaxed and how his eyes seemed to be completely taken up by Frances’ appearance. Andrew smiled to himself, feeling a tug of familiarity. He had never seen himself as clearly as that moment, watching the Duke gaze lovingly at his daughter. *This is what they meant*, he realised, *when they said she filled up my whole vision*.

“You can’t. This is my engagement party.”

“I know, Frances, but I had to see you.”

Andrew couldn’t help but feel like he was witnessing something incredibly private, even though the two of them had said nothing untoward. Rather, it was the softness, the delicacy of the Duke’s voice that was laced with such incredible intimacy which was so impactful. He spoke to Frances as if she was the most precious person in the world, Andrew couldn’t help but be warmed by it.

“You can’t! You - you - just can’t. Lord Hart - my fiancé, he is inside.”

Frances’ voice was slightly strangled. Andrew noticed the way she clung to her elbows so tightly that he could see the whites of her knuckles. He felt he finally understood the real reason behind Frances stiffness and insecurity since she had returned home.

“Actually, I think he can,” Andrew said.

Both Frances and the Duke looked at her in utter surprise.

“But Papa -,” Frances began, but Andrew took his daughter by the elbow, pulling her away from the Duke to speak softly in her ear.

“Just listen to what he has to say, Frances.”

“Why?” Frances looked up into his face in desperation. “I am to be engaged!”

“Because perhaps, in talking to him, you will discover the difference between marrying for love, and marrying because it is the right thing.”

Frances stared up at him, her beautiful face a picture of both amazement and love. Her beautiful amber eyes, eyes that were so much like her mother’s, filled with tears which she quickly dashed away in frustration.

“I - I - but this is my party - what of Lord Hart?” she hissed, looking over her shoulder in fevered distress towards the Duke. Andrew witnessed in her glance all the love he needed to see to assure him that he was finally encouraging his daughter on the right path.

“Go and listen to him, my dear.” He pressed a hand against his daughter’s perfect, beautiful face. She grew more and more like her mother every day. “It is what your mother would have wanted.”

Frances held his gaze for a moment, and then nodded.

“We shall go to the back garden,” she said. “Away from... indiscreet eyes.”

Andrew nodded in agreement. “Go around the side through the rose garden. Don’t worry about anything else, my dear.”

Frances’ face was filled with momentary relief but then she covered it, pulling her face back into a serious frown.

“It is only a brief discussion,” she said, unconsciously touching her hair and twirling a red curl by her cheek. “It shall not change anything here.”

“Of course.”

Her father smiled and gave her a little push towards the Duke. He stood waiting, rubbing his hand over his chiselled jaw in anxiety. Yet as Frances returned his face couldn’t help but split into a soft smile.

“Come with me!” Frances hissed, not realising how she had instinctively grabbed the sleeve of his coat with tell-tale familiarity. “I shall talk to you, but then you must leave!”

“I am your servant,” the Duke said, unable to stop himself smiling as he let himself be led discreetly away by Andrew’s daughter. Andrew watched the couple disappear into the rose garden and around the back of the Fortescue house. On the front lawn, guests played croquet completely unaware and through the open parlour doors, Andrew could see Lord Hart laughing generously with the Prince Regent inside, with a lovely young girl already standing between them. No doubt the sly Prince already had another match in mind.

“Oh, my darling, he was not right for her after all,” Andrew whispered softly.

At times like this, when he was alone and reflective, Andrew often found himself speaking to his wife. He did not believe in ghosts, he was far too god-fearing for such superstitions, but he had long held the belief that his wife’s angelic spirit watched down on him and his daughter from above, guiding them gently and listening when they spoke. As Andrew stood, a beautiful swallow, clearly on its way migrating south, perched on the sundial in front of him and sang softly. As he listened to the swallows comforting song, the dark clouds above began to rumble. He looked up to the smile.

“Thunder is coming,” he whispered.

The swallow cocked its head towards his voice but did not fly away. He smiled down at the little bird and said, “Well, it seems I have to cancel an engagement.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“*You* shouldn’t have come here!” Frances hissed, pulling Ralph into the back garden.

“I was invited!” Ralph protested, following her obediently under the bower of roses, and trying not to think about how stunning her creamy skin and golden hair looked against the late season crimson blooms.

“Well, you cannot request a private audience with me! It is most improper!” Frances snapped, jerking his elbow in irritation and clearly not aware that manhandling him into the back garden was equally improper. It was so endearing Ralph couldn’t help but smile.

“Don’t smile!”

Frances commanded, crossing her arms angrily if a little unhelpfully. Ralph couldn’t help but notice how her crossed arms pushed her perfect breasts together in the enticing neckline of her gown.

“Fine, I won’t smile.”

He pulled his sleeve from her grasp and seized her hand. Frances gasped, trying to tug her fingers from his grip but he held on.

“But I need to speak to you.”

“Let go, Wynter, you - you can’t touch me like this anymore.” Frances glared up at him, again forgetting her own sense of propriety as she used his shortened name. “I am to be engaged today.”

“I know that.” Ralph swallowed hard, trying to dismiss the still prevalent feelings of jealousy he had towards Lord Hart. “But - but

there is something you have to know before you go through with it.”

“Alright. Then tell me.”

Frances whipped her hand from his grip defiantly as if she didn't care, but Ralph could see the familiar, delightful flush of her skin beginning at the base of her throat. He knew her too well. It was always a sign that her passion was raised. Even if her voice was as cool as ice and her manner uninterested, Ralph could see that she still cared.

“I - I have something of yours.”

He reached inside his jacket pocket and slowly withdrew her leather-bound journal. Frances stared at it for a moment, then her cheeks reddened with humiliation.

“Did - did you read it?” Her voice was low, her eyes accusing.

“No,” Ralph said, for even though he had read the letter addressed to him at the end he had never actually perused her diary entries. He hadn't needed to. The letter had told him everything he needed to.

“Well. Good.” Frances tipped her chin defiantly. “May I have it, please?”

“Of course.”

Ralph handed it back to her, feeling the thrill of her fingers brushing his, but before he could even realise what she had done, Frances had thrown the journal down the garden with the unnerving good arm of a girl who had grown up the only child of an active father.

“Frances!”

They both watched the book spin through the air, its spine opening and the pages ruffling before it landed an apple tree, dislodging several ripe fruits which fell to the ground in a loud cluster of leaves. *She'll be able to teach our sons how to bowl a fast ball!* Ralph marvelled momentarily before exclaiming:

“What did you do that for?”

"I left it behind for a reason." Frances eyes blazed with angry fire. "I don't want to be reminded of that girl, or her memories. I have left it all behind and I don't want it back."

"None of it?" Ralph stepped forward to rub her arms gently. He felt her stiffen, the sharp intake of her breath, but then her retreating out of his grasp.

"None of it." Frances shook her head, her red curls bobbing. "I am going to be engaged. I must leave my old life behind."

"What if I don't want you to?" Ralph asked boldly, glancing towards the conservatory to make sure their conversation was private, but the room was empty, the door was firmly closed. Baron Fortescue must be keeping most of the guests at the front of the house and George must have been making good on his promise to keep everyone occupied. He turned back to Frances, trying to show in his eyes the truth of his words.

"Then you should have said something that day." Frances' glared at him, her face pinched in fury. "That day I left you. You said you could forgive self-involvement or vanity but not -"

Frances sucked in her breath, looking down at the ground for a moment. Ralph's heart went out to her in her distress. He wanted to gather her into his arms, but he knew she would push him away right now.

"But not me," she finished, lifting her eyes to meet his. "I have moved on. I have no need of the past."

"I see," Ralph nodded, not believing her for a second. She was hurt, just as he had been hurt, but she still cared deeply. She just needed to trust him again. He had an idea.

"Well, if you'll excuse me." He began walking down the garden, across the wet grass, towards the apple tree.

"What are you doing?" Frances cried out behind him.

"Well, I *do* have need of the past," Ralph said, removing his outer jacket as he assessed the tree. The journal had fallen on one of the higher branches and got stuck, but Ralph had always been a good

climber, ever since he was a boy.

“Especially when it contains the most precious words of my life.”

“What do you mean?”

Frances was beside him just as Ralph had reached up and pulled himself up onto the lowest branch, the bark scratching against the shiny leather of his boot.

“Do you mean to say you read it?” Frances screeched up at him, and Ralph couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. He grasped the higher branch above him and pulled himself further up, the small twigs and leaves brushing his cheek as he scrambled to sit upon it, looking down at Frances.

“I read the letter at the back,” he said. “It was addressed to me, wasn’t it?”

Frances glared up at him. Ralph almost caught his breath over how beautiful she looked. She was standing in a pile of fallen golden leaves, almost the exact same shade as her red, fiery hair. Her blue gown was stunning against the red, gold and green of the ground and skin was as pale and glowing as a pearl.

“You read it.” Frances bit her lip. “You - you shouldn’t have done.”

“I am glad I did.” Ralph reached up, stretching his fingers high to dislodge the leather from the branches. “Otherwise I might never have realised the truth about us.”

“The truth?”

Ralph caught the journal on by the corner and it toppled. He lurched forward to catch it but lost his balance and tumbled out of the tree.

“Ralph!”

He landed fast on his back in a forgiving pile of leaves, wincing as his head hit the floor.

“Are you alright?”

Frances face was above him, creased with worry as she sat beside him, her soft hands instinctively pulling leaves from his hair.

"I am now." Ralph lifted the journal up to her, grinning.

"You fool!" She grabbed it from him and struck him over the head with it.

"Ouch!" Ralph rubbed his forehead, blinking hard. "What was that for?"

"You could have hurt yourself!" Frances scolded and her amber eyes were narrowed with worry. "Why did you do that?"

"I told you. It's important to me. Without your journal, I might have never realised the truth of your heart."

"You think you know the truth of me?" Frances raised her eyebrows.

Ralph could feel the warmth of her body pressed against his side; feel the way her hands were braced against his chest as she stared down at him. He never wanted to move if she would only stay this close to him.

"I think I do." He lifted his hand to gently hold hers against his chest. This time, she didn't pull away from him. "I think you love me, and I have come to tell you that I love you, too."

"You said you couldn't forgive me -," Frances whispered.

"I know, I know," Ralph spoke over her. "But I've changed, please, hear me."

She looked like she wanted to pull away, so he tightened his grip on her fingers, but she didn't move. She had taken on the quality of a statue, barely breathing as her eyes searched his face for any sign of insincerity.

"I was too proud, far too proud to see all the ways you have accepted my flaws and my mistakes and yet when you tried to tell me yours..." Ralph shook his head ruefully. "I let you down, Frances, I should have told you the truth."

“What is that?” Frances whispered. She still wasn’t moving - wasn’t pulling away but wasn’t coming any closer either. It was as if she was paralysed, his words captivating her in place despite her desire to run away.

“That there is nothing on earth or in heaven that would make me stop loving you, Frances. Nothing.”

He watched as tears welled in Frances’ eyes and her chest rose and fell quickly as she sucked in her breath to control her emotions.

“You’re too late!” She shook her head at him, trying to pull her hand away. “All of this... it is too late.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Ralph said, earnestly, refusing to let go of her. He would never let go of her again.

“It does,” Frances nodded fervently, “You deserve someone better, someone kinder -,”

“There is no one better, there is no one kinder.” Ralph raised himself up onto his elbows, still holding her hand tightly. “I only want you.”

“No.” Frances closed her eyes, tears brimming at the corner of her eyes. “No, this is not how it is supposed to be - you - you need someone else, someone who can -”

“Who can what?” Ralph demanded. “Who can love my daughter? Who can be respected by my household? Who will nurse me in sickness and health? You have already proven you can do all of these things.”

“There are other women, more deserving women, who can do those things,” she said, refusing to open her eyes. He knew she was trying not to give into her feelings because of propriety, just as he had done before. He could see in the tension of her neck and the rigidity of her back.

“But none of those women make me feel as you do.” Ralph traced a slow, seductive path with his finger over the back of her hand. Despite her formal posture and her tightly closed eyes, she turned her hand over so that his finger could stroke her palm and wrist.

"None of those women make me burn as you do," Ralph said softly. "None of them make me lose my mind completely as you do."

Frances let out a shuddering breath and her hand trembled, but she didn't move.

"We can be happy together, Frances." Ralph said. "I know it."

"I left you so that you would be happy!" Frances cried, tears falling down her perfect cheeks as she turned her shining, brown and orange eyes on him. "I left you so you would be happy in the life you have chosen!"

"Oh, my darling." Ralph cupped her cheek in his palm, brushing away her tears with his thumb. "Do you not see that I will never be happy in life if you are not by my side?"

"We must not -" Frances whimpered, but Ralph could feel her resolve melting. "I am not the best choice; I will only hurt you more - I cannot make you happy -"

"Frances," Ralph pressed his fingers against her lips, silencing her and giving her a tender smile. "Don't you understand that I am only happy when I see you smile?"

"Oh, Ralph."

His name was like honey on her lips and he grabbed her neck, pulling her mouth earnestly towards him to cover it with kisses, tasting the sweetness of her like a man tasting water after a month of thirst. He caught her off guard and she toppled forward on top of him. Ralph fell back into the leaves, still holding Frances tight to him as he breathed in the sharp scent of the apples around them, the green grass and her perfume, soft and familiar.

He wrapped his other hand around her back, tugging her closer so that she was half laid across him, and her body almost perfectly fitted to his. It was everything he had dreamed of, everything he had been wishing for and praying for and longing for in the depth of the night. He held her firmly to him as her dress draped over his body and he felt the miraculous press of her warm chest against his, her warm legs under her skirts against his leg, feeling the first hints of her strong supple flesh that had been hidden from him so far. He wanted her,

more than he wanted breath. He wanted to possess her, body and soul.

Be mine, a voice inside him chanted like an incantation. *Be mine forever, Be mine for all time.*

"I love you." He pulled away, looking into her eyes earnestly. "Do you love me?"

"I do." Frances smiled widely, her face full of sweetness and love so that Ralph's heart cramped with compassion and pride. "I do love you."

"And -" Ralph found himself nervous as he spoke the words. He had been preparing for this for the last few days, the Prince Regent had coached him on it, but now the moment was here he was struggling to express himself adequately.

"And will you... will you have me, Frances?"

"What does that mean?" Frances whispered playfully, winding her fingers into his hair in a way that drove him mad. She must know what he meant! She was just teasing him, and it was thoroughly infuriating and altogether bewitching.

"Are you... proposing something?" She bent down and whispered the words against his lips, sending a thrill down his entire body.

Before Ralph could answer, a loud rumble sounded above them, and the heavens opened. Heavy rain descended upon them, instantly beginning to soak their clothes and hair.

"Come into the house!" Frances cried, scrambling to her feet and pulling him with her.

"No, no!" He grabbed her waist, pulling her close and blinking through the sheets of rain. "I - I - is there somewhere more private we can go?"

Frances looked at him for a moment, beautiful and damp in the pouring rain and oncoming darkness of the storm.

"I think I know a place," she shouted above the thunder. "The pagoda,

by the lake. Come with me.”

She offered him her hand and Ralph looked at it, knowing that she held his whole future in her palm.

“If I do, will you give me an answer to my question?” he asked, brushing his wet hair from his brow.

Frances smiled, her eyes glittering mischievously. “It depends what the question is. Come!”

Chapter Twenty-Six

“*H*ere it is!” Frances cried, pulling Ralph through the rain down the bank to the red and green painted pagoda that overlooked the lake. Ralph rushed forward over the damp planks of the deck to pull the doors open.

“After you!” he gasped, shaking his dark hair like a dog as Frances laughed at him, and then dipped inside.

The pagoda had been closed for the winter, white sheets spread over the furniture, it already had a cold musty smell. Frances crossed to the secondary doors that opened onto a small fishing deck over the lake and looked back up towards the house. She saw a far offline of black coaches, marching like beetles, moving away from the house through the rain.

“The guests are leaving!” she exclaimed.

“They are?” Ralph came and stood beside her. “Perhaps it is because of the weather.”

“Or perhaps Papa sent them away.” She suspected her father had a stronger grasp on her feelings than she did at times. “He might have known.”

“Known what?” Ralph asked, raising his dark eyebrow suggestively.

“Known that you - known that we -” Frances struggled for words and blushed.

Then, knowing he was finding her discomfort funny, decided to turn the spotlight back on him.

“What did you want to ask me?” she demanded.

Ralph smiled. “I think you know.”

“I think you will have to ask me if you want an answer,” Frances replied tartly. She wanted him to know he wasn’t the only one who could be surprising, or play games, though in reality her heart was thundering.

“Will you be mine?” Ralph repeated, taking her small hands in his large, warm ones. “Entirely? Forever?”

“You know I am, already. I told you so.” She smiled up at him, enjoying how difficult it seemed to be for him to say the actual words.

“Very well,” Ralph closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. “Will you marry me, Frances?”

“Yes.”

Ralph’s eyes flew open in surprise and Frances laughed at his shocked expression.

“You will?”

“I will.”

“Be wife? Be mine? Live with me, raise children with me, grow old with me?” he asked, holding her hands so tightly they hurt a little.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes and yes, if God wills it!” Frances laughed, reaching up to cup his handsome, amazed face between her hands. “I will do all of these things, Ralph Wynter. I will marry you.”

He embraced her then, gathering her up into his arms so rapidly that she squeaked in surprise, making him laugh aloud as he spun her around in the air.

“Oh, my love!” he cried, setting her on her feet and brushing a damp tendril of hair out of her eyes. “You have made me so happy!”

“Not nearly as happy as you have made me,” Frances responded,

hugging him tightly, breathing in the strong scent of him along with the dampness of his hair and clothes.

“Frances,” he whispered into her hair, his hands stroking up and down her back making her shiver. She became aware of the desire rising in her, the need to press closer to him but also was starting to feel the chill of her clothes.

She shivered and looked around, turning her attention to the furniture. “I’m sorry, we have nothing here we can dry off with...”

She drifted off, glancing at Ralph fully for the first time and realising that he was indeed, soaked to the skin. She could see it, since he had removed his jacket to climb the tree. His white shirt was sticking to him at the arms, revealing the muscles.

“It’s alright,” he smiled, holding her close inside those perfect, strong arms. “We can keep each other warm.”

She marvelled at his strength, feeling her breath coming short before she stopped herself, stepping back from him with a smile.

“It shall do you no good, recently recovered from illness, to sit around sopping wet.”

She quickly averted her eyes from his chest and turned to a basket the family kept in the corner of the pagoda, usually containing blankets and summer items.

“You might catch a chill. We might have something here -,”

Ralph joined her as they rummaged together, their damp arms moving against each other quietly.

“Here!” She held up a thick blanket triumphantly. “Take off your wet waistcoat and shirt and wrap yourself in this.”

“Take off my shirt?” Ralph lifted his eyebrows. “My, my! We are moving quickly.”

“Don’t be foolish!” Frances laughed, slapping him lightly with the back of her hand. “But please listen, you shall be much more

comfortable, and it will be safer, too.”

She pressed the blanket into his chest and looked at him earnestly.

“Very well, if you think so.” Ralph shrugged, and smiled roguishly. “You are my fiancée, after all.”

He unselfconsciously removed his waistcoat and Frances gulped. Of course he was used to being in a state of less than formal attire in her presence, given how he had worn nothing more than a nightshirt as she had nursed him in sickness, but she was not quite ready for the broadness of his bare chest as he lifted his shirt over his head, the dark hairs across his muscles and rigid stomach. She swallowed hard and tried not to stare as he wrapped the blanket snugly around his shoulders and looked at her.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” Frances gestured to her gown. “I can hardly remove this in front of you even if we *are* engaged to be married.”

“You forget that I’ve seen you in your nightgown before.” Ralph smiled with hooded eyes and Frances blushed deeper at the thought of him admiring her body.

“It is not the same!” She crossed her arms defensively.

“Very well, but you cannot sit around in that, you’ll freeze half to death.” Ralph turned to the basket and rummaged for a moment, pulling out a summer house coat that Frances sometimes wore after bathing. It was covered in blue flowers and was not as warm as a blanket, but it would provide adequate coverage for her.

“Please,” Ralph pleaded, holding it out to her. “I shall stand out in the rain whilst you remove your dress, if necessary, but I should never forgive myself if you took ill today.”

Frances hesitated and then took hold of it.

“You do not need to go outside,” she said, “Just open the buttons at the back of my gown and then turn around.”

"I am your servant." Ralph smiled, gesturing for her to turn around. She did so, lifting her sopping tendrils away from her neck so he could undo the small row of buttons on her back. As her dress parted, the fabric shifted the pearls at her neck.

"Frances, is that -,"

Frances flinched as she felt his tender fingers touch the scar left by Arabella. She moved away, letting her damp hair fall back into place to cover it.

"Turn away," she whispered over her shoulder, not wanting to see the look of pity in his eyes. "I will undress."

She heard him obey, saw from the corner of her eye how he had crossed to the window to gaze out, the blanket wrapped tightly around his shoulders. She quickly pulled her sodden blue gown over her head, leaving her only in her shift and stays. She shivered against the chill of the air on her bare arms and lower neckline, before tugging the housecoat over and tying the best tight around her waist, making sure her chest was appropriately covered.

"Thank you for looking away." She turned back to the room. Ralph nodded kindly, but she could tell he was still preoccupied by the scar he had seen.

"Shall we sit down?" He pulled the sheet off the chaise lounge and they sat down together, Frances strangely self-conscious and shaking a little from the persistent cold. Outside, the rain continued to pour, bouncing on the surface of the lake and drowning the house beyond in a persistent dreary mist.

"Are you cold?" Ralph asked.

"N- No -" Frances said, her teeth chattering lightly. Ralph smiled tenderly and pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her as he leant back against the chaise lounge. She sighed in satisfaction, as she nestled against his chest, and he tugged the rough fabric of the warm blanket around her shoulders.

"You know what this reminds me of?" he murmured into her hair.

"What?"

“Of the time you saved Matilda from the lake, and we sat by the fire in the stable master’s house,” Frances could feel him smiling against her damp forehead. “You were so beautiful then. Somehow, you are even lovely when most other people would resemble a drowned rat.”

“I’m sure that’s complimentary. *Somewhere*,” Frances said drily, and Ralph laughed softly, and she felt it vibrating in his chest. Contented, she sighed and together they listened to the pouring rain and each other’s slow, soft breathing.

“I am sorry, Frances.” Ralph said.

“Why?” she asked, leaning up to look at him. “You did not make it rain, and you did call me beautiful. Even if it were only compared to a wet rodent.”

“Not for that.” Ralph smiled quickly. “No, I am sorry for... for Arabella.”

Frances didn’t say anything. She knew this would be a hard topic for him and didn’t want to push. She was also not entirely sure what she would say about Arabella. She still sometimes had nightmares about that moment Arabella had struck, twisting the scarf around her neck and sending her down into darkness.

“She hurt you.” Ralph’s fingers made their way to her pearls, shifting the gems slightly to reveal the line of pink scarring underneath. “I - I am so sorry for it.”

“It was not your fault.” Frances swallowed, feeling self-conscious about the scar. “Is - is it - very ugly?”

“No, of course not!” Ralph exclaimed. He gently stroked her neck, admiringly. “You are beautiful, nothing could ever change that. I am only... sorry that you have suffered.”

“We both did.” Frances pressed her hand against Ralph’s face, admiring the strength of his jawline. “But it’s over now.”

“Thank God,” Ralph breathed, pulling her down to rest her head against his chest again and sighing contentedly. “And now we can be together again.”

Frances' heart swelled with joy at the wonder of having him here, in her arms, when it had been all she had wished for and all she had hoped for. She couldn't help but feel the slight burn of overwhelmed, joyous tears in her eyes that this miracle had come to pass.

"I missed you," Frances confessed, her lips moving against his chest. "More than I can say."

"I missed you, too." Ralph kissed her hair gently. "More than life."

"There were rumours that -" Frances hesitated, unsure how to phrase her concerns. "Rumours that you were... were unwell again after I left."

"I was not unwell, do not worry, the doctor pronounced me back to all health." Ralph squeezed her shoulders. "But I will admit... I was lonely."

"I have been, too." Frances nuzzled against his neck. "So lonely."

His breathing had changed, coming from his mouth in ragged, slow gasps. She looked up at him curiously, worrying that he was somehow feeling unwell again but then saw his eyes were dark with desire.

"Kiss me, Frances," he murmured, his neck flushing with passion.

Frances licked her lips nervously. She had kissed him many times, had kissed him desperately and passionately, but there was something about their closeness, the privacy of this moment, and the unexpected strangeness that made her anxious. She tentatively bent her lips to his. As soon as they met, all of Frances' nervousness melted away to nothing. Ralph kissed her eagerly, his hands making their way up her back, rubbing in gentle, comforting circles. She felt his fingers tangling into her wet hair, pulling out her blue ribbon until her hair was loose and cold down her back and around her face as she breathed heavily against him.

"Say it again, Frances," he murmured against her lips.

"Say what?" Frances asked, rubbing her nose to his.

"Say you'll marry me." His lips moved across her jaw, the furious heat

of them following her throat and making her shudder with pleasure. Frances gasped in delight.

“You’ll have to ask me again,” she replied breathlessly, his fingers teasing the neckline of the housecoat. Ralph smiled at her impetuosity and then grasped her shoulder, pushing Frances back so she was lying beneath him, her back pressed against the velvet of the chaise. He brushed tendrils of hair from her face and gazed into her amber eyes. He pushed his face into her neck, gently kissing the skin there so she shivered.

“Will you marry me?” he growled into her flesh.

“Yes,” Frances whispered, threading her fingers through his dark hair and closing her eyes tightly.

Ralph reached behind her head to unclasp the pearls at her throat. Frances took a sharp breath as the pearls slipped from her skin, and the full extent of her pink scar was revealed. She swallowed hard as Ralph’s fingers stroked her skin lovingly.

“The doctor says it may fade,” she whispered, shifting self-consciously beneath him.

“It matters not.” Ralph bent his head to kiss her scar reverently. “I shall buy you all the pearls and rubies in the land to cover it in public and in private, well -”

Frances gasped as she felt the flicker of his tongue run over the skin of her neck and arched her back, pressing her hands into the wood of the chaise lounge.

“I shall have to find other ways to avert your attention from it.”

“Ralph!” Frances gasped, pushing into his chest slightly. “We - we should be cautious; we are not yet married.”

“You are right.” Ralph knelt up above her, the blanket falling away from his shoulders fully revealing his broad chest and shoulders. “What do you think might be appropriate?”

“Well...” Frances squirmed underneath him. In truth, she wanted

nothing more than to let Ralph ravish her, body and soul, but she was trying to be respectful.

“I suppose we may kiss,” she said finally. “That seems appropriate.”

“Of course, my love.” Ralph lowered himself towards her lips eagerly, but Frances stopped him, her fingers pressed over his mouth.

“Only kissing,” she warned, seeing the mischievous, boyish charm light in his eyes. Ralph nodded innocently.

“Of course,” he said, kissing the pads of her fingers against his mouth. He kissed her intensely on the lips again and then, lowering his mouth to the skin at the base of her throat, his kisses drifting lower and lower. Frances felt her breath coming short and managed to gasp:

“Ralph - we - you -”

“They are only kisses, my love,” Ralph murmured as his fingers parted the folds of the coat, revealing the bare slopes of her breasts. “Only kisses.”

Frances gasped as his tender lips touched the sensitive flesh, feeling her nipples harden inside the fine, almost see-through cotton of her stays. Then Ralph’s lips were there, taking her nipples into his mouth with his warm tongue and breath, making her moan and arch her back against the velvet cushion.

“Oh, Ralph!” she whispered, reaching down to stroke his hair. “We - we shouldn’t -”

“We said only kisses, did we not?” Her fiancé rested his chin against her sternum and looked up at her. “Do you want me to stop?”

Frances squirmed as his kisses moved down her body, kissing her ribs and stomach through the fabric of her shift. She whispered. She knew that they should stop, that it wasn’t appropriate for her to let him kiss her so fervently and deliciously, but she couldn’t do it. She held her breath as his mouth moved lower, as one hand slid the hem of her shift up to her stomach and the cold air fluttered against her bare legs and groin. She was as still as a hunted animal, as taut as a bowstring, as Ralph’s feather-light kisses rained down upon her naked thighs and hips.

“Ralph,” she whispered, closing her eyes tightly and clenching her hand against the wooden edge of the chair.

“Frances, do you want me to stop?”

She couldn't speak as his lips, so warm and soft, brushed against her inside thigh.

“Frances!” his tone of command roused her, and she looked into his eyes, seeing all the stormy passion she felt inside reflected there. “Tell me, do you want me to stop?”

She loved him and soon, he would be her husband. It was everything she had ever wanted, more than she had known she desired and yet it was also perfectly simple: She loved him and he, wondrously, loved her. They would be happy together, she knew it, because there was nowhere in the world, she felt safer in his arms.

“No,” she whispered, closing her eyes and gasping as Ralph's lips unerringly found the most tender and secret parts of herself.

“Ralph!” she cried out, part in surprise, part in passion as his tongue worked against her flesh, hot, liquid movement against the cool, unknown skin of her, a pressure and teasing sensation like she had never known.

“What - what are you doing?” she gasped, reaching down to clutch his hair between her thighs. She had not thought such things were possible!

“Only kisses, my sweet Frances,” Ralph's lips murmured, his breath hot against her. “Only kisses.”

“Oh - Oh -!” Frances was suddenly made of heat and flame, her body answering a call so deep and primal that she could not speak to it or stop it. As Ralph's mouth worked magnificently against her flesh, she felt part of herself rousing, like a long slumbering beast, to meet him. Then, when she thought she could go no further, that there was no higher pleasure than this, to lie with her hands dug into her future husband's hair and her neck stretched back with more tension than an archer's bow, Ralph's tongue flickered softly and he lifted his head to look at her.

“Say it again,” Ralph whispered.

Frances moaned, her hips quivering, unable to answer, unable to think and desperate for his lips and touch once again.

“Say it,” Ralph bit the inside of her thigh tenderly, making her gasp. “Say it again, Frances.”

His tongue flickered lower, delving into her and releasing a series of grand vibrations along her limbs so that there was nothing else she could do but cry out, helplessly, “Yes!” Frances gasped. “I will marry you!”

THE END.

Epilogue

“*D*id you have a good day, my love?”

“I did. Thank you, husband.”

Ralph smiled as his new bride rose up on tiptoes to kiss his lips tenderly. He couldn't quite believe that it had truly happened, and Frances was now his wife - today had been their wedding day, for all to see. Even the Prince Regent had been there to witness it, as well as all their friends and family, including a very sporting Lord Hart - who was accompanied by his new wife. Frances had even been good enough to invite her bitter cousin, Amelia, though the sour faced girl did not attempt to congratulate her cousin or speak to her. When Frances and Ralph had stood in the doorway to Sinclair Manor, welcoming their guests back from the church for the wedding breakfast, Amelia had marched right past Frances, leaving her husband, the Marquess Huntley to offer his compliments.

“Perhaps you ought to follow her,” Ralph had leaned over to whisper in his new wife's ear. “And remind her that she lost a bet.”

“But she didn't!” Frances had whispered back conspiratorially. “I swore I would have you by the end of the year, and we have waited until March to be wed!”

“It doesn't matter.” Ralph had squeezed her hand surreptitiously. “You had me long before that, my love.”

Ralph had wondered if a second wedding would be strange for him since he had already married once, but he wanted Frances to have everything she desired, even if what she desired turned out to be an elaborate fanfare. In the end, however, his fiancé had surprised him by denouncing a grand ball and party and suggesting a simple

ceremony in Sinclair Abbey with a wedding breakfast.

“I want Matilda to be included in it all,” Frances had said. “And she is far too young for a ball. Much better to have a simple celebration, and for everyone to be home and in their beds in good time.”

Ralph had been touched by her generosity of spirit, and suspected that she was already trying to ensure, that this time down the alter was as different from his first as possible. Her goals were achieved. The little chapel at Sinclair Abbey on the Sinclair estate was full to the brim with happy guests, many of whom were their own tenants and household, so that as he and his new wife exchanged their rings and vows a lusty cheer from the locals went up, making Ralph and Frances laugh with merriment. It could not have been more different from the austere occasion of his first marriage.

Then, once they had returned to Sinclair Manor, the afternoon was filled with a jolly tea and some games and dancing, much to Matilda’s delight who had been so excited to be a bridesmaid. Ralph had been overjoyed to look over from a conversation with Frances’ father at one point and witness his new wife and his daughter playing a game of hopscotch on the patio, Matilda happily donning Frances’ own wedding veil.

Ralph had laughed aloud at the sight and Matilda, on hearing him, had looked up and called back into the parlour, “Look, Papa! I’m winning!”

“You are not!” Frances objected, putting on a mock tone of severity. “Be honest with your father!”

“Be honest with your husband!” Matilda had teased, poking out her pink tongue at her new stepmother, and then falling into fits of giggles as Frances grabbed her close and began to tickle her.

“You have made my daughter very happy,” Baron Fortescue had said, watching the charming display with Ralph.

“No, sir,” Ralph shook his head, “It is her who has made me happy.”

The Baron nodded, and then smiled as he watched his only daughter chase Ralph’s across the lawn in her simple but beautiful wedding gown.

“This is what Frances needs, has always needed. A family.” The Baron raised his glass to Ralph. “She will be a wonderful mother.”

Ralph watched his wife chase his daughter with a heart that could burst.

“She already is.”

He had been impatient for the guests to leave, and for Matilda to go to sleep, so that he could finally have his wonderful bride to himself - but now that they found themselves in the library alone, sipping brandy, he was grateful simply to be in her presence and reflect on a memorable day.

“Matilda asked something of me tonight,” Frances said quietly, setting her brandy glass down. “As I put her to bed, that is.”

“Oh yes?” Ralph smiled. Since Frances had moved back into Sinclair manor, she had made it a habit of tucking Matilda into bed at night. He loved it, and sometimes joined them, cherishing the time they spent together.

“Yes,” Frances fiddled with her new wedding ring, a sign that her mind was turning.

“Come here,” Ralph set down his brandy glass too and reached out for his wife, taking her hand and then pulling her slowly into his lap, enjoying the feel of her warm body and the slippery satin of her dress against him. “What is it?”

Frances hesitated. “She asked if she might call me Mama.”

“I see.”

“It seems a little absurd,” Frances went on quickly, “since I am only eight years older than her, and I should never like to tarnish the memory of her mother, but I also didn’t want to say no -”

“Hush, my love.” Ralph pressed his fingers over Frances’ lips, smiling softly. “Do not worry. Matilda may call you what she pleases.”

“Really?” Frances said quietly, searching his face intently.

“Yes!” Ralph laughed softly. “You are her mother by law now, after all, and if that’s how she feels about you then I am glad of it. You have already been an important role model to her, you love her like a mother, why should you not be honoured as such?”

Frances hugged him close, squeezing his shoulders. Ralph pressed his nose into her neck, breathing in the scent of her: lemons and sugar.

“Thank you,” Frances whispered. “Thank you for sharing your child with me.”

“I hope Matilda will be the first of many children we share,” Ralph kissed her neck. Frances pulled back and for a moment he wondered if the mention of having children was too much for his young wife on their wedding day, but then he saw a familiar and enticing gleam in Frances’ eye. She kissed him, slowly, the way that she knew he most enjoyed, allowing their passion to build and his hands to find their way into her hair by familiar paths before pulling away, just as they were both breathless and flushed.

“I do, too,” Frances breathed. “Take me to bed, Wynter.”

Ralph laughed. He liked it when she used the name of their courtship, just as he loved the sound of his first name on her lips in moments of passion. He stood up, still holding her in his arms, making her squeal with delight.

“Well, let us go to bed then, my dear Duchess.”

He laughingly carried her down the corridor to the staircase, but promptly put her down as they came upon Holton, patiently waiting by the stairs as his Master and Mistress approached in a fit of giggles.

“Holton,” Ralph said, standing close to Frances and feeling his naughty wife gently stroking his back, hidden from Holton’s view. “What can we do for you?”

“Nothing, sir.” Holton smiled. Ralph had a feeling that even what Holton couldn’t see he somehow knew about, as was his way. “I was just coming to tell you that Lady Matilda is settled, and the staff has gone to bed.”

“Thank you, Holton.” Frances nodded, meekly.

“Your welcome, Duchess.” Holton bowed happily and retreated down to the servant’s quarters. It was strange to hear the title “Duchess” used in the house again, but seeing Frances installed as his wife was everything he had ever dreamed of.

“Come on!” Frances whispered quickly, and then tugging his hand she pulled him up the stairs, her eyes glittering wickedly. Ralph laughed and allowed himself to be dragged good naturedly to the bedchamber. Ralph felt as if he were a younger version of himself, being tugged away for a secret liaison with a girl at the ball. Except this was much better. They rushed into the master bedchamber, Frances laughing lightly, her red curls free and uncurling and her white and silver wedding dress gleaming in the firelight. Ralph grabbed her to him, pushing her up against the bedpost and kissing her ferociously, greedily, finally allowing himself to be free to his desire. He quickly shed his wedding coat, waistcoat and shirt as Frances watched, her eyes wide as she leaned back against the bedpost like the figurehead on the bow of a ship.

“You are...” She wet her bottom lip with her pink tongue as she looked over his bare chest. “... so beautiful.”

Ralph smiled. He had been called many things in his life and given many compliments, but he had never been called beautiful.

“*You* are beautiful, my love.” He reached up to remove the dainty silver and diamond tiara she had worn in her hair. “The most beautiful woman in the world.”

“It cannot be so,” Frances whispered, watching as he set the tiara carefully on the dressing table. She had not moved, as if she waited for his permission or perhaps, even his touch. “You must have seen... you must have been with... more beautiful women.”

Ralph knew Frances was not insecure about her looks, or about his love for her. He knew that she was just gently goading him, pushing him to speak out what he found beautiful about her and perhaps, to show her. Even though they were newlyweds, Ralph felt as if he already understood his wife’s hidden meanings as easily as he understood his own desire. He smiled and reached for her again.

“Never.” He took her hands slowly, lifting them above her head and then pressing them to the wood of the bedpost with one hand. She

didn't resist and watched him carefully, her mouth slightly open and her amber eyes following his every movement.

"I've never been with a woman who's scent drives me so wild." He pressed his nose into the hair behind her ear, enjoying the feeling of her gasping against the deep inhalation of his breath.

"I've never been with a woman whose skin tastes so delightful." He kissed her throat, listening in rapture to the slight tick as her throat worked with desire.

"I've never been with a woman whose body..." with his other hand he carefully unpicked the buttons at the side of her dress, loosening it and feeling her chest rise and fall rapidly.

"Ralph -" she gasped.

"Whose body makes me lose my mind."

He reached down to pull up the hem of her skirt with one hand, reaching to grip her knee and feeling the surprise as her leg lifted, the daring naked flesh of her thigh and her blue wedding day stockings wrapping around his body, pulling him roughly against her despite her being unable to use her hands. Ralph looked at her in surprise, but also growing curiosity.

"You are not the only one losing their mind," Frances gasped, her pupils wide and engorged, her breathing heavy.

What if my passion is equal to yours?

He remembered her words, all those months ago in the study, and now the wonderful reality of them crashed upon them. He felt a rush of gratitude, almost reverence that she wanted him so much.

"I have missed you," she whispered into his ear, a thrill of excitement trembling down his spine. "I have missed your... kisses."

Ralph thought his knees might go weak at her words. It had been many months since their intimacies in the pagoda, but each second of those sweet moments of passion were seared into Ralph's mind. Since that day they had been very proper, Ralph had not wanted to take

things too far before their wedding night and Frances had agreed, but he had no inkling that she had also been reliving and reminiscing those sweet, precious memories just as he had.

“Have you?” He smiled at her. “Well, there are more wonderful things in store, my sweet bride.”

“Will you show me?” she asked, her voice throaty. “Will you show me... everything?”

“Gladly,” Ralph whispered, then he turned to sit on the bed. Frances looked at him carefully, her fingers twisting. He took one hand and kissed it softly.

“Undress, my dear.”

Frances’ face flushed with his command, but her hands moved instantly to the hem of her gown. Ralph watched withheld breath, barely moving, as his beautiful wife slowly lifted her gown, revealing first her dainty shoes which she slipped out of then, then her blue stockings and the edge of her light shift. Then she was pulling it up further, over her belly and her stays, cut especially low to give that lifted bosom in her gown, so that her perfect, pale breasts raised for better viewing. Then she raised her arms, he saw the bareness of her - and then the gown was off, in a puddle on the floor. Frances shook her hair; red curls tumbling over her skin.

“Like that?” she asked gently, her hands instinctively twisting her curls behind her ear. She had no idea how beautiful she was.

“Just like that,” Ralph swallowed hard. “Now the rest.”

Frances’ hands reached for the ribbons of her stays then she stopped, stepping closer.

“I might require some assistance, husband,” she whispered, lightly stroking her hands over his shoulders.

Ralph shivered at her touch but nodded, lifting his hands to slowly unpick the bow at the front of her breasts.

“I am yours to command, dear wife,” he said, pulling the cotton

ribbons through their corseted holes, mesmerised by the way her bosom rose and fell, trembling like milk pudding, as her breathing became heavier. Finally, the stays were undone. Frances unhooked her arms and stepped back, the shoulder of her shift falling. Ralph gulped as he admired her, her bare shoulder and slope of her breast peeking at him, her red curls tumbling alluringly around her neck, the outline of her body visible through the nearly sheer covering of her shift. Frances seemed to know what effect she was having upon him, as she smirked at him wantonly.

"You - you are -," Ralph was too choked to speak. He thought of mythical creatures, of Helen of Troy, of goddesses from literature who had driven their lovers mad with their beauty. He wondered if he had married one.

"Come, and touch me, Ralph," Frances whispered, leaning back against the wooden vanity, her hands clutching the carved edge. Ralph rose to his feet, wondering if they would support him. He crossed slowly towards her, holding her gaze the whole time. Her amber eyes glowed, like a tiger awaiting its prey. Ralph was more than happy to be her victim. She boldly reached down to untie his breeches, leaving the ribbons hanging loose like a promise for later, and then lifted her arms around his shoulders.

"Mine to command, are you?" Her fiery eyes were mesmerising, and Ralph felt unmanned, unmoored, as if he had bewitched her. He nodded dumbly.

"Only yours," he managed to stammer, his hands automatically tangling in her hands. She considered him softly. She was like a courtesan, her eyes bold and wanton, naked as Venus but much more alluring. He felt as he were her servant, dedicated only to her pleasure. It was infinitely arousing, and he waited with bated breath, to hear what she most desired.

"My lady?" he urged softly, tugging her hair gently. She closed her eyes briefly and took a shaking breath as she leaned her head back against his hand.

"Touch me, Ralph," she whispered.

"Where?" he whispered.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. Then, with a trembling hand, she guided his hand to her thigh.

"There."

He required no further encouragement. In a quick motion he had lifted her up, set her on the vanity. She let out a little pleased, gasp of surprise. They held each other's eyes as his fingers stroked her calf, the crook of her knee, her thigh and then, as Frances drew in her breath and shifted slightly, slipped into that secret place between her legs. Ralph held his breath as he touched his wife for the first time, his fingers following where his lips had once been and going further.

"Before, when I kissed you-" he saw her eyelids fluttering and knew she was listening. "I only went so far, but there is more, my love, much more to be explored..."

He was watching her face rapturously as he slid his fingers inside her.

"Ralph!" she gasped, her eyes flying open to stare at him. Part in question, part in wonderment.

"This is the most secret part of you," Ralph breathed, kissing her face tenderly as he softly pressed his finger against her firm, throbbing flesh. "This is what we will share together."

"Yes," Frances gasped as her breath began to come quicker and her hips tipped rhythmically toward his hand. "Yes!"

"When we are joined," Ralph gasped, trying to control his own straining manhood as Frances' gasps became little cries of pleasure, her tilting hips encouraged him to a faster rhythm. "You shall feel me too, and our pleasures shall meet and be one,"

"Oh - oh - yes!" She was clinging to him, her face pressed into his shoulder, seemingly unaware of her teeth biting down into his flesh. "Oh - yes - take me now!"

God, I want her, I want her so much -

Ralph tried to contain himself, he wanted to treat her gently for her first time, and so pulled away gasping out: "At this rate we might not

make it to the bed!"

"I don't care!" She was breathless, panting, naked and perfect. "I want you!"

Ralph gasped with his own surging need and lifted her, letting her legs wrap around him and her kisses rain upon his throat as he carried her to the bed, and the two of them fell, a jumble of hot limbs and gasping moans, into the linen.

"I - I want to feel you," Frances panted, her hand reaching towards his breeches, "I want us to be one."

"Yes, my love." Ralph guided her hand away and lowered his breeches, watching for any sign of trepidation and worry in Frances' face but saw only her own passion as her hand reached out to grasp his bare hip.

"We must be careful," he whispered, parting her knees carefully and lowering himself towards her. She took a shuddering breath as she felt the first, firm press of him against her flesh. Ralph bit his lip, bit down so hard he tasted blood and gripped the linen in his hands behind her head.

Control yourself! He commanded himself. *Don't hurt her, you'll never forgive yourself if you do!*

"We must go slowly at first," he gasped.

He tried to enter as carefully as he could, tried to be as tender as possible, but Frances lifted her hips and drew him in - and before he could think he was buried inside her, groaning with desire.

"I want you," she gasped into his ear, making a shiver of pleasure travel throughout his body to the joined place between them. "I want you, Ralph."

"Oh God, Frances," he panted. "Oh, my sweet Frances."

He was a slave to her desire. He collapsed against her body, feeling her exquisite flesh part further to make space for him - the fusion of their skin drove him mad. He took his mouth in hers, breathing life

into her as he kissed her, savouring this moment of their first joining before gently, inquisitively, thrusting his hips to hers. He could control himself if necessary, he would withdraw if he must, but though Frances gasped sharply against the pressure of him, her own hips answered his question with a gentle, pulsing response.

“Oh, my love,” he whispered, “Does it - does it -?”

“Perfect!” Frances gasped. “It - it’s perfect! Don’t stop!”

At her words, Ralph lost all sense of himself as he became lost in a world of sensation and feeling. They moved together then, man and wife, two parts of the same soul re-joining in precious, holy union and for the first time in his life, Ralph felt the true wonderment of loving someone body and soul.

“Oh, my darling,” she murmured, turning her face this way and that against the pillows, and Ralph could feel from her spasming flesh that she had reached the peak of her climax. Her nails dug into his shoulder and her whole body trembled like a leaf.

“Oh, my darling! I love you!”

At her words, he released into her, gasping, crying, and clutching to her as if he were a drowning man and she was a mermaid, pulling him from the sea.

“Are you - are you -?” Frances gasped, unable yet to form the words for her their lovemaking. Ralph smiled, wearily lifting himself to look down at his ruffled, flushed wife.

“I am well, my love.” He kissed her nose. “That is how it is when a man finds his pleasure, just as you found yours.”

“We found it together.” Frances kissed him slowly, and then laid his warm brow down against her naked breast, sighing contently. “We are man and wife now. Joined forever.”

“Forever,” he murmured, kissing her damp neck and cheek, enjoying the sensation of feeling her smile. “I love you Frances,”

“I love you too, Ralph,” he heard her whisper dreamily, clearly

drifting towards sleep, yet neither of them moved. Ralph wondered if this was perhaps the sweetest way to end a wedding night; joined in love and body, and now floating, softly towards being joined in their dreams. As sleep came upon him, Ralph was filled with thankfulness that finally, after all the wandering and searching, he truly felt at home. Home was here and it always would be; safe in Frances' embrace.

The End?

Extended Epilogue

Eager to learn what the future holds for Ralph and Frances?

Then you may enjoy this **extended epilogue**.

Simply [tap here](#) and you can read it for **FREE**, or use this **link**:

<https://www.lisacampell.com/5wuv>

Afterword

Thank you for reading my novel, **A Bet to Wed the Duke**. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind to [write a review HERE](#)?

It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book, in order to get better at writing.

Please use the link below:

<https://www.lisacampell.com/7i2r>

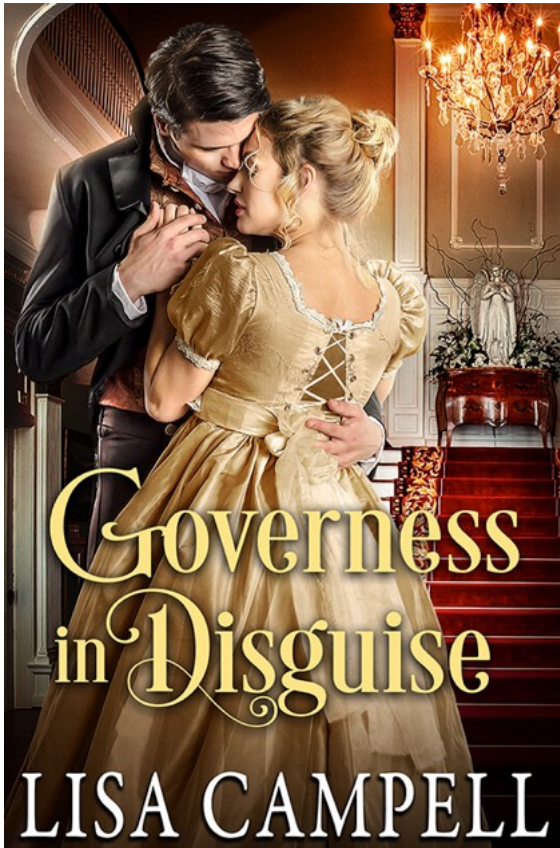
Do you want more Romance?

Turn on the next page to read the first chapters of my previous best-selling novel: **Governess in Disguise**

This is the story of a woman determined to find the truth behind her father's death and punish the one responsible. But the suspect was nothing like what she expected. A charming rake who owns London's most known gamble hall cannot be innocent. **And falling for her father's killer was not an option, was it?**



Governess in Disguise



Chapter One

Emilia jumped at the sudden sound of breaking glass, piercing her finger with the needle. Yelping, she sucked her finger and inspected the damage. There was a bit of blood, but she hadn't ripped the skin. Why did needles have to be so sharp, anyway?

She could hear someone shouting close by, but it was muffled. Then Emilia heard a cry and a loud bang. What on earth was going on?

Putting her sewing aside, Emilia rose to her feet and hurried to the door. The downstairs maid was crossing the foyer from the drawing room. She slowed when she saw Emilia and bobbed a quick curtsy.

"Miss Hill."

"Jenny. What's going on? Has someone dropped something?"

Jenny hesitated and bit her lip. "Sort of, Miss Hill. It... it's Mr. Christian."

Emilia groaned. Of course, it had to be her Uncle Christian. He must be drinking again; it was always the time when things got incredibly noisy in the house. The man liked to throw things around. Her father had told Emilia just to ignore him and carry on, but Emilia argued that Christian's drinking was getting out of hand. It was a miracle they had anything of value left since Christian came back into their lives.

"Where is he now?"

"In your father's study."

"What?" Emilia stared at the other woman. "He knows he's not supposed to be in there. Father's not home."

“Roberts tried to tell him, but he got a fist waved in his face.” Jenny shrugged. “We don’t argue with Mr. Christian when he’s been drinking.”

Which meant everyone kept out of his way and Christian was allowed to run rampant. Emilia sighed and waved Jenny away.

“I’ll deal with him. Just make Roberts aware that I might need a couple of footmen to drag him to his room.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. “You’re going to tackle Mr. Christian?”

“Someone’s got to.” Emilia said as she strode down the hallway.

It had been six months since her uncle had turned up on their doorstep asking for a place to stay, and Jonathan Hill, being the kind-hearted man that he was, had allowed his youngest brother to move in. Which meant bringing in his money problems and drinking habits as well. Emilia hadn’t seen her uncle in three years since he moved to Ireland after claiming he was going to start up a business. That hadn’t happened, and now he was being a waster in their home.

Her father had argued with her that Christian needed guidance, that he was young. Emilia had pointed out that she was only five years Christian’s junior and she could keep herself in control. She guessed it had to do with the fact Christian was born late in his parents’ marriage, a good fifteen years after the last child. He was given far too much leeway, and it resulted in everyone seeming to enable his behaviour. And Christian knew it. He played on it.

The only one who didn’t let him get away with it was Emilia. She was not going to stand for her family to be disrupted by a wastrel who gave nothing to the family. Christian didn’t like it and they were consistently butting heads. Her father despaired at the two of them, but Emilia knew that he wouldn’t stand up to his little brother. It was like dealing with a little boy instead of a thirty-year-old man.

Her father’s study was at the back of the house, overlooking the gardens. They had inherited the house from her grandfather, the Earl of March’s, estate. Her father, Jonathan Hill was a gentleman and he was treated as such. As the second-eldest son of an Earl, he was not particularly in the line to inherit the title, but her father never seemed to be too bothered. He was content as he was.

Emilia wished she could be laidback and calm like her father, but her fiery persona got in the way. She wasn't one to sit back and let things happen, especially not when she saw an injustice.

She headed into the study without knocking. Christian was sitting on the couch by the empty fireplace, a glass full to the brim with an orange-coloured liquid. He had taken his jacket off and it was on the floor near the door, his cravat tossed almost into the hearth with the buttons on his shirt undone. His shoes were strewn around the room, one under the couch and the other near her father's desk. He was staring into the hearth, and Emilia could see the glass littering the floor. How many glasses had he broken?

"Uncle Christian?"

Christian looked up, his glazed eyes meeting hers. "Emilia. I didn't realize you were home. You're normally on one of your walks."

"I had some sewing to do." Emilia strode across the room. "What's going on? I can hear you throwing things from the other side of the house. And why are you in Father's study? You know he doesn't like it when you're in here."

Christian grunted and raised the glass to his lips. "He won't have to worry about that now."

"What are you talking about?"

Christian downed his drink in one go, lowering the glass and running a hand through his hair. When he looked up again, Emilia saw how red his eyes were, and that he had been crying. Now she was nervous. Christian never cried. He was an angry man. Tears weren't part of his emotional makeup. He also looked like he had aged ten years in less than a day.

"Your father...he's dead."

She stared at him in stunned silence. Emilia didn't think she had heard him correctly.

"What...he's dead? How is that possible? You must be mistaken."

“I’m afraid it is possible. I received word this morning.” Christian hung his head. “He was found in an alleyway a short while before dawn.”

Her father was dead? The words floated around her, but they were refusing to sink in. Emilia tried to grasp at them, but they kept moving out of reach. She counted to five, staring at her uncle willing him say something that made sense. But he said nothing and so the words just hung heavy in the air.

With a crinkly to her brow, Emilia said, “I never heard anyone come in this morning.”

“They didn’t want to announce themselves. Roberts got me and I met with the constable. He...” Christian rubbed a hand over his face. “Your father, he...he had several head injuries. His skull...let’s put it this way, his head was bashed in.”

Emilia’s ears were starting to ring. She felt the room sway around her. And then it tilted. She staggered, grabbing onto a chair to stop herself from falling. Christian shot off his seat and hurried to her, catching her as Emilia collapsed.

“Whoa, Emilia, steady there.” He eased her into the chair and knelt before her. “I didn’t know how else to tell you.”

“Not like that!”

Emilia could feel her chest tightening. She was going to start hyperventilating in a moment. She swallowed hard and counted to ten. And then again. And once more. Her father was dead. It couldn’t be possible, could it? He often went out early in the morning, and Emilia was sure she heard him come home the night before. This had to be a mean trick.

“Are they sure it’s him?”

“They are. He was wearing the family ring.”

The ring he never took off. Emilia felt her throat closing up and swallowed hard. It didn’t help.

“Was...was it a mugging?”

“The constable believes it was, but...” Christian hesitated. “I think it was murder.”

“What?” Emilia stared at him. “Murder? Who would want to murder Father? He was a good man.”

Christian gave a lopsided shrug and rose to his feet. Glass crunched under his feet as he went to the fireplace and put the empty glass on the mantelpiece.

“You know what people will do when they’re giving out punishment. It can often go too far and then they panic.”

“What are you talking about?”

For a while, Emilia thought her uncle hadn’t heard her. Christian stood staring into the empty hearth. She sat up, the room tilting as she tried to rise to her feet. Emilia sat back down heavily.

“Uncle Christian, talk to me. What are you talking about?”

“I know who killed my brother. He’s said as much to my face before. And with his temper...” Christian turned, his reddened eyes locking with hers. “I never thought he would carry it out, though. I thought it was just talk to frighten us.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“It was Thomas Andrews.” Christian blinked a few times and then looked away, rubbing his eyes hard. “He’s the one who runs Drake’s.”

Emilia knew about Drake’s. It was a gambling hall in Cambridge, a very popular place where many members of Society would go when they were at their country estates. Her father and Christian went to it on a regular basis, Christian more so. Emilia knew that both brothers were not very good, and they did get into debt, but her father always settled his quickly. He never let it get pushed to one side.

“Why would the owner of a gambling place murder Father? What would he gain from that?”

“Non-payment of debts.”

“But Father always paid his debts.”

Christian grunted. “He doesn’t always tell you everything, Emilia. Jonathan was in more debt than you realize. And he refused to accept it until Andrews addressed it. Andrews threatened to do some damage to him if he didn’t pay it last night. Now look what’s happened.”

Thomas Andrews. Her father’s murderer. Even as that sank in, Emilia could feel a part of her fighting that logic.

“A gambling owner wouldn’t murder someone who owes them money.”

“You don’t know Thomas Andrews.” Christian said darkly. “He’s a very vindictive, hot-tempered man. He’ll do anything to get his own way, and he’s always close to snapping.”

“But to murder a man because of an unpaid debt...”

“Maybe it went too far, and Andrews panicked. That alley is often used for some of his clientele to sneak in and out.” Christian shook his head and ran his hands through his hair, making it stand up on end. “I warned Jonathan that we shouldn’t be going there as he scared everyone into submission, but Jonathan said he could handle it. He always thought he could handle it.” He began to shake, and then he started towards the door. “Excuse me, Emilia, but I... I need to be alone.”

Emilia stared after him as her uncle left, the door slamming behind him hard enough to make the vase on a nearby table topple off and smash to pieces on the floor.



“Come on, Father!” the girl on the back of the yellow gelding called as they waited at the top of the hill. “I swear you and Midnight are getting slower every day!”

Thomas rolled his eyes as he guided his stallion up the incline. Anna was far too lively at this time of the morning. He would prefer to be

still in bed trying to catch up on the sleep he wanted. But Anna was an early-morning person and she always wanted to go riding, and with no chaperone Thomas had to go with her.

He didn't bother to hide a yawn as Midnight reached the top of the hill.

"Anna, we've been riding for over an hour now. Shouldn't we be heading back now?"

His daughter laughed. God, looking at her was a lot like looking at her mother. Her blonde hair was wildly whipping about in the wind, refusing to stay in the simple braid Anna had managed to do herself a short while ago. But her hair seemed to match her perfectly. She had such a lively spirit that made Thomas envious. He was getting too old to be so spritely, especially so early in the morning. It had to be the reason his dark hair was already going grey at the temples. Anna teased him about that, calling him an old man and pointing out the lines around his eyes. Thomas had simply argued that he wasn't getting old, but he certainly would if Anna kept making him get up at the crack of dawn. He was not a morning person anymore.

Dark eyes that matched Thomas' met his with sparkle and amusement.

"Stop complaining. It's only riding!"

"Not everyone has your spirit." Thomas yawned again. He needed his bed. "And certainly not at this time of the morning. Your father was up until two in the morning making sure everyone went home and nobody stole any money."

Anna rolled her eyes. "Why don't you let someone else do it? You can afford to."

Because Thomas was not as trusting as his daughter thought. Anna and his mother Margaret were the only two people in his life that he completely trusted. His brother and sister came close, but they were a little wobbly on being consistent. After so many betrayals by people close to him, he was very picky on who he let in. That included the people who worked at the business he had bought two years before.

It had been a moment of grief that had made Thomas decide to buy Drake's from the previous owner, but he didn't regret it. It made him

feel like he had some purpose back in his life. Once his wife Olivia died, Thomas had felt lost. He didn't know what to do. If it hadn't been for Anna, he might have gone into a downward spiral. His daughter and his job kept him going.

Thomas needed it some days. Even if his patrons drove him mad with their tantrums regarding paying up their debts. Thomas had no time for whining from grown men.

He nudged his horse into motion as Anna started trotting her gelding Ada away. Why did he have to have a child who was so awake and lively before the sun came up? The sun had come over the horizon completely a short while ago, the morning still pretty chilly. It was bracing, but not enough to wake Thomas up completely.

He would be quite happy to stay in bed and sleep until a more reasonable time.

If only he could find a governess for Anna. She was twelve. She needed one. Thomas couldn't teach her the lessons himself. But he was lucky if he kept hold of a governess for more than a couple of months. They all seemed to be keen enough for the walk at first, but then suddenly they said they were leaving, and practically ran away with no real explanation. Thomas was confused as to why. Anna was outspoken, but she was nice to them. He never treated them badly, as far as Thomas was aware. He didn't even interact with them much. So why were they so scared of him?

He would have to look farther afield. Maybe get his mother to interview them; she had a better sense of character than he did. He would trust her judgement when choosing someone to look after Anna.

"Father?"

"Hmm?"

Anna had slowed Ada to a stop, staring out across the fields in front of them. Thomas rode up beside her.

"What is it?"

"We've got company. Look."

Anna pointed. Thomas squinted, and then he saw the two horses trotting along the path that they needed to take back to the house. One of the riders was a young man who looked terrified to be on the back of the horse. The other was a raven-haired woman, holding herself poised in the saddle as she cantered along the track.

Thomas groaned. Not her again. That woman just would not leave him alone. If they had been anywhere near where she lived, it might be perceived that she was out for a ride with a chaperone. But they were nowhere near her home, and Thomas knew exactly why she was here. This wouldn't be the first time he and Anna had encountered the raven-haired woman on their early morning rides.

She just would not listen to the fact she was not welcome. Thomas could admire stubborn, at times, but this was something else. It made him want to scream.

"Shall we go a different way?" Anna asked.

"No, she's already seen us, and she'll just follow us." Thomas glanced at his daughter as he urged his horse to keep moving, Anna's horse falling into step beside him. "Just hold your tongue, Anna."

"You've never been bothered before."

"I'm not in the mood for another tantrum at this time of the morning. Lady Wilson's shrieks will give me a headache for the rest of the day." Thomas rubbed at his head. "My head is throbbing enough, as it is."

"She gives me headaches for a week." Anna grumbled. "You'd think the amount of times you've told her to go away she would take the hint."

"Well, some women just won't take no for an answer." Thomas arched an eyebrow. "I know someone like that."

"At least I know when I'm not wanted."

There was that. Anna had more common sense than this grown woman Evelyn Wilson, who had got it into her head that she and Thomas were meant to be together. After having the suggestion poured into her ear, many years ago now, she had set her sights on Thomas. It was just a shame for her that Thomas already desired to

marry Olivia Tinsdale, who had eventually become his wife.

But that didn't stop Evelyn. She followed him around, not caring that her husbands were often present, and she was being completely shameless. Olivia had objected to Evelyn's presence, which had resulted in a public argument where Olivia had served all acquaintance with the woman.

Evelyn completely ignored this, of course. Thomas had never known such tenacity in a woman. With her in particular, it was not a good quality.

A widow herself now. Two husbands and fifteen years later. She was still adamant that she and Thomas were fated to finally be a couple. Thomas couldn't get his head around that. No other person he knew was this slow on the uptake.

He braced himself. Meeting Lady Evelyn Wilson this early in the morning when he was suffering from sleep deprivation was going to turn this into a bad day before the day had fully started.

Chapter Two

There was the rumbling of hooves, and then Evelyn drew alongside him. She gave him a bright smile, her eyes sparkling.

“Thomas! What a surprise to find you out here.”

“You know we go riding every morning, Lady Wilson,” Thomas said sharply. “And I don’t believe I permitted you to use my Christian name.”

“Come on, Thomas. How long have we known each other? Fifteen years?”

“You’re more than enough for fifteen minutes,” Anna snapped.

Thomas bit back a groan. He had hoped Anna would hold back her retorts, but Anna’s impulse control, when it came to speaking her mind, was not admirable. His daughter was fiercely protective, and she made no qualms about declaring who she did and didn’t like. Evelyn had come under fire many times over the years, especially since Olivia died. His darling wife had managed to keep their daughter somewhat tame.

Thomas wished he knew how to tame his daughter. He had no idea.

Evelyn’s smile froze as she glanced at Anna. Then she sniffed and turned to Thomas.

“Haven’t you taught her any discipline yet, Thomas? Women should not be so...brusque and allowed to get away with it.”

“And women should understand when they’re not wanted,” Anna shot back.

Thomas groaned and held up a hand. “Anna, please.” He looked back at Evelyn and said, “Kindly do not comment on my daughter, Lady Wilson, it is not your place. I’m the one raising my daughter.”

“I know.” Evelyn sighed. She sounded almost convincing. “Such a shame. I’m sure a governess would be able to curb her tongue.”

Anna snorted. “I’d like to see them try.”

Thomas glared at her. Then he turned to glower at Evelyn. Why did she like to target Anna to make the girl respond? Thomas wasn’t entirely sure what she was up to with regards to that. Did she think Thomas would send Anna away if she goaded the girl too much?

Thomas figured Evelyn didn’t like sharing him, although that left him bemused. He wasn’t about to be shared with anyone, least of all this woman.

It was getting really tiresome.

He glanced over his shoulder at the young man who had followed Evelyn. Probably one of her father’s footmen. He did not look happy to be here. Thomas straightened up in his saddle. At six-feet-five, even astride a horse he towered above everyone else.

“What do you want, Lady Wilson?”

“I was out for a ride and I saw you here.” Evelyn shrugged. “I thought I’d come and join you.”

“We were on our way home.” Thomas urged his horse into a slightly quicker trot. “Come on, Anna. I suggest you carry on your morning ride alone, Lady Wilson. Good day to you”

“Thomas...”

But Thomas had already cantered on ahead, Anna close beside him. They headed down the slope and both horses broke into a gallop. Evelyn was known to be uncomfortable riding at speed, hopefully, she wouldn’t follow them.

Others might call him callous and harsh for treating Evelyn in such a

way, but they hadn't been dealing with her for fifteen years.

They reached the trees and headed along a path weaving through the copse on the edge of Thomas' estate. It wasn't a large estate, but it was enough for him and Anna. Glancing behind him, Thomas couldn't see Evelyn or her chaperone. Hopefully, they weren't following him. They had a reprieve, for now.

"Honestly!" Anna huffed as she eased her horse into a walk. "Why is she so set on becoming Mrs. Andrews?"

"It's the fault of my grandmother, I'm afraid." Thomas sighed. "Back in our first Season, she was trying to pick out a wife for me."

"She chose Lady Wilson?"

"I'm afraid so. She thought Lady Wilson would be perfect, and put it into the woman's head, it was quite a thing to untangle myself from, but I was already known to favour your mother. Even after two marriages and my obvious dislike for her, Lady Wilson still thinks it can happen."

There were days when Thomas cursed his grandmother, if he thought of her at all. The woman had been a busybody and a nightmare of a relative. Even his mother despaired at her. At least Thomas didn't have Evelyn's parents coming after him demanding that he made an honest woman out of Evelyn. They had diverted her to other men, more convenient and profitable marriages, and those men had died within a few years. Evelyn was considered an unlucky woman to marry now.

Thomas had no intention of becoming another dead husband.

"It's such a shame." Anna sighed.

"That wasn't sarcasm, was it?"

"No."

"Even if I did marry her, how would she be able to manage with you?" Thomas glanced at his daughter with a smirk. "I know you'd make it hard for her."

"She would make it hard for me." Anna declared affronted. "She would make you choose between us. If a woman actually loved you, she wouldn't do that."

"And in any case, there is no question about who I would choose." Thomas leaned over and gently tugged his daughter's locks. "You first and foremost."

Anna giggled and swatted his hand away. "That's why I love you, Father." She kicked Ada into moving. "Race you!"

Before Thomas could respond, she was galloping off across the field. Shaking his head with a smile, Thomas set off after her.



"Miss Hill?"

Emilia looked up. Jenny was hovering in the doorway to her father's study. The maid looked nervous. Emilia swallowed and retrieved her handkerchief. Her cheeks were wet, and her eyes were stinging. Jenny didn't need to see this.

"Jenny." Emilie dabbed at her eyes. "What is it?"

"Baron and Lady Chambers are here. They don't have an appointment to visit, but I thought you might want to know."

Charlotte. She was here. Emilia rose to her feet and squared her shoulders.

"Show them into the morning room, Jenny. I'll be along in a moment."

"Very well, Miss Hill."

Jenny left. Emilia closed her eyes and took several slow deep breaths. Her father was dead. It had sunk in and hit Emilia in the gut. She felt lightheaded from her crying and her throat was sore. She felt like her breakfast was going to come back up. But Emilia knew no amount of crying was going to bring her father back. Any further crying was going to make her feel worse, so she needed to take a deep breath and

step forward with this.

Even though she wanted to go to her room and curl up under the sheets and cry some more.

It took longer than she wanted to feel calm enough to leave Jonathan's study, but Emilia managed. She had to look somewhat presentable. Looking distressed was understandable, given the situation, but Emilia didn't think walking around looking like a bright-red tomato would look good.

Her uncle could cut harshly into her when he wanted to. He certainly had when Emilia got upset. Emilia had inherited her mother's naturally pale skin, so it had a tendency to flare bright red when she was upset, or when she had been in the sun a little too long. Christian had also made comments that Emilia wasn't a true member of the family because she didn't look like any of them. Every member in her father's family were tall and well-built with dark hair. Even the women were well-built. Emilia was a little over five feet tall and slightly built with a willowy figure. Her hair was ash-blonde and her eyes, her favourite feature, were bright green.

Christian wasn't the only one who commented on her appearance - many of her father's said the same, simply because Emilia looked like her mother's side of the family instead of theirs - but his words cut the most.

Taking a deep breath, Emilia rose and crossed the room. Her legs felt weak and she could feel the tears building up again. Above her head, she could hear the sound of more breaking glass and things being thrown. Christian was going to break everything in the house if he kept up like this. Emilia could understand his despair, but did he have to break everything? She made a mental note to speak to Roberts about moving anything of real value out of sight. She didn't want to lose anything more because of her uncle's tantrums.

A tall, beautiful woman with golden blonde hair was pacing around in the morning room, her skirts swishing as she moved. Her companion, a tall, broad-shouldered man with pale red hair was sitting on one of the couches. The woman turned as Emilia entered. Her face was pale, and Emilia guessed she didn't look any better.

"Charlotte."

“Emilia.” Charlotte Chambers hurried across the room and tightly embraced her. “Oh, Emilia, dear. We had to come over as soon as we heard.”

“I’m glad you came.” Emilia stepped back, grasping her friend’s hands. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, darling.” Charlotte bit her lip. “You have our most sincere condolences. I’m going to miss your father.”

“So am I.” Emilia looked around as Charlotte’s husband appeared at her side. “Peter.”

“Emilia.” Peter Chambers took her hand and kissed it briefly, squeezing her fingers. “This is a shock to everyone.”

Emilia wasn’t about to argue with that. She turned to the door and saw the butler hovering in the doorway.

“Would you get us some tea, Roberts?”

“Yes, Miss Hill.”

Roberts disappeared. Charlotte tugged Emilia to the couch and sat her down, easing down beside her and linking her fingers through Emilia’s. The two of them had been friends for more than twenty years, Charlotte having practically grown up on a neighbouring estate. Emilia couldn’t think of a more loyal, honest person than Charlotte. Even after her marriage to the dashing, somewhat socially awkward Peter Chambers, Charlotte was still a frequent visitor to Emilia’s home. Christian had complained about her constantly intruding, but Emilia had reminded him that he was a guest as much as Charlotte and didn’t have a say in who came to visit her. Thankfully, Jonathan had backed her up on that.

Give Christian half an inch and the man took a mile, she was sure of it.

“How are you holding up?” Charlotte asked. “Have you started on any of the arrangements? I mean...” Her face flushed. “I’ve not had to deal with a body before, I don’t...”

"I don't know yet," Emilia said quietly. "Uncle Christian says he's got to meet with the coroner and the funeral director. He said he would deal with everything."

If Emilia was brutally honest, she would rather have her father back. She shouldn't be having to bury him, not when he had a lot of life in him. Jonathan Hill had been a healthy man and his physician had been optimistic in Jonathan living at least thirty more years. Emilia had thought that would be the case.

"I... I just can't believe this." Emilia stared at her hand joined with her friend's. "Father's never had a mean bone in his body. He never got into disputes with anyone. Except for Uncle Christian, of course, but other than that..." She swallowed. "He makes friends with everyone."

"We know that." Charlotte glanced up at Peter, who was standing over them. "Word has already got around that your father was found in an alley near Drake's, that gambling hall on St. Mary's Street. There are speculations as to what happened."

Emilia stared. "Already? He was only found a few hours ago."

"You know what Cambridge is like. Word gets around here and the surrounding area faster than anything would in London."

There would be so many members of Society who would be coming up with their own thoughts on the murder and who might be responsible. Then those speculations turned into rumours and rumours had a nasty habit of becoming fact. Emilia hated the rumour mill. Jonathan said it was nothing to worry about and to ignore it.

Now he was dead, and it was going to be impossible to ignore.

"What are people saying about this?"

Charlotte hesitated. She glanced at her husband again, and Peter nodded. Emilia looked from one to the other.

"What? What do they say?"

"That your father got into an argument with Thomas Andrews and..." Charlotte took a deep breath. "Andrews lost his temper. He beat your

father and lost control. Then he got rid of the body. Look, we shouldn't be talking about this, Emilia. I don't want to upset you."

Emilia almost burst out into laughter. Not upset her. It was too late for that.

Jenny entered the room with the tea tray and placed it on the coffee table. She glanced over at Emilia with a nervous frown.

"Miss Hill?"

Emilia took a few deep breaths to push the hysteria back. It had been a few moments since Charlotte had told her the rumours and she was still struggling with wondering whether to laugh or cry. She had ended up doing a mixture of both, and that had resulted in Emilia sounding like a braying animal, breaking down even more than before. Charlotte and Peter had sat there, Charlotte awkwardly patting her hand while Peter looked like he would rather be anywhere else but with them right now.

"I'm fine, Jenny." Emilia attempted a smile, but it didn't work. "Thank you."

Jenny didn't look convinced, but she left. Charlotte shifted beside Emilia and reached for the teapot.

"I'll pour out the tea."

"Oh, Charlotte!" Emilia gasped. "I'm the hostess. I should be pouring the tea."

"Oh, should you?" Charlotte arched an eyebrow at her friend. "Do you think you'll be able to pour the tea when your hands are shaking as they are?"

Emilia looked down. She hadn't realized that she was still trembling. Normally, she could keep her composure and hide it behind a facade. But this wasn't exactly a situation that could be compared to anything else. How could anyone maintain composure after hearing someone they loved dearly was dead in suspicious circumstances?

Emilia tried to focus on something else. Anything else. Crying was not

going to bring her father back. She had to concentrate on something different. Like anger. Anger Emilia could deal with. She could direct that to where it was needed. She knew just where to direct it.

Thomas Andrews. The man who was responsible for all of this. Emilia knew, deep down, that there was a chance that Andrews could be innocent in all of this, but his name kept coming up. Chances were, he was the last person to see her father alive. He had to have something to do with it. Emilia needed to focus on him. She needed answers.

She wanted answers. And from what Charlotte and Peter had just said about him, going straight up to Andrews and demanding the truth was not going to be easy. Andrews would straight-up deny that he had anything to do with it. From her experience, men were smooth-talking individuals when they wanted to be, and they were believed. Women were not so lucky; men could walk away from a scandal unscathed and leave the women to drown.

Charlotte finished pouring the tea and handed one cup to her husband. Then she passed one to Emilia.

“Here you go. Take it easy drinking from it.”

“All right.” Emilia’s hand trembled only slightly as she took a sip. She was glad that she didn’t tip it completely over on herself. She lowered her cup and put it back in the saucer. “How long has Mr. Andrews been running this place? Drake’s, did you say?”

“Just over two years,” Peter said. He had settled into the chair across from his wife, crossed his legs as he raised his cup to his lips. “Came straight out of mourning and bought the place.”

Mourning. So, the man was a widow. Emilia stored that away for later.

Charlotte picked up a biscuit from the tray. “Apparently, this isn’t the first time someone’s come under his wrath, but it’s the first...” She glanced at her husband, who gave her a slight frown. “It’s the first time someone’s died because of it.”

“Does he make a habit of attacking his patrons, then?”

“From what I’ve been told,” Charlotte said hurriedly, gesturing at

Peter. “Peter’s mentioned some stories about Mr. Andrews, and they make me very nervous.”

Peter sighed. “My interactions with Mr. Andrews have been brief, but he’s treated me with respect. I keep to the rules that Drake’s has, so I don’t have any trouble.”

“But word gets around,” Charlotte protested. “You’ve told me so yourself.”

“It’s called gossip, darling. You shouldn’t take that as gospel.”

If it had been any other situation, Emilia would have said the same thing. But she had also learned that in among the gossip there was a sliver of truth. And so, she found herself leaning forward, focusing on the man across from her.

“Go on, Peter. What have you heard?”

Peter arched an eyebrow. “I didn’t think you listened to rumours, Emilia. You’re constantly saying that it should be taken lightly.”

“Just talk to me, Peter. I want to know.” Emilia glared at him. “What have you heard? Why have your stories about Mr. Andrews made Charlotte nervous? What’s he done for that to happen?”

Chapter Three

Peter hesitated. Then he rubbed a hand over his eyes.

“He does have a temper, but that’s always reined in. If you do come across his temper, it’s a rare thing and not something you want to be honoured with.”

“And the governesses,” Charlotte added. “Don’t forget about them.”

Emilia blinked. “Governesses? He has children?”

“A young girl named Anna.” Charlotte shook her head as she nibbled on her biscuit. “And she’s had twenty governesses in the last two years alone.”

“Twenty?” Now Emilia was staring. “How is that possible? Is she an unruly child?”

“She’s outspoken, but polite enough child,” Peter answered. “I’ve bumped into Mr. Andrews with his daughter before, and she’s a respectful young lady.”

That didn’t explain anything. If the child wasn’t the reason so many governesses were running away, it had to be the father. He had to scare them enough that they disappeared quickly. A shiver went down Emilia’s spine.

“Do these governesses...” she swallowed, “He doesn’t make them disappear, does he?”

“What?” Peter blinked. “No, of course not. They just leave. Then the rumours start up again. It’s been nearly six months since he had a governess, and now he’s spending less time at Drake’s to look after his

daughter himself.”

“Which makes me worry for the daughter, with all the stories I’ve heard about him.” Charlotte bit her lip. “I don’t understand what Lady Wilson sees in him, in all honesty.”

“He actually has women falling over themselves to be in his company?” Emilia asked.

Peter rolled his eyes. “Just one woman, and not the type of woman anyone would be happy being pursued by.”

“What does that mean?”

“Evelyn Wilson is a twice widowed, a neighbour of his. It’s an amusement in the area. That woman has been vocally devoted to Mr. Andrews since they were barely grown, and Mr. Andrews doesn’t care for her at all. I’ve personally witnessed her coming into Drake’s to see him and then being escorted out moments later.” Peter shook his head and sipped his tea. “Those evenings are certainly entertaining.”

Emilia could imagine. She had met Evelyn Wilson a few times, and she didn’t care for the woman. She had a lot of airs and graces, far more than her current status, and she was one who possessed a single-minded attitude. If she didn’t have someone agreeing with her immediately, they were the enemy. Evelyn liked to think she was better than everyone. Emilia chose to keep out of her way as much as she could. She didn’t have time for women like Evelyn Wilson.

“I think I would side with Mr. Andrews with regards to Lady Wilson.” Peter went on. “I don’t know how anyone can stand to be in her company.”

“She’s a beautiful woman of wealth and contacts,” Charlotte pointed out. “That makes her prime marriage material.”

Emilia snorted. “That doesn’t put anything towards her character, Charlotte.”

Peter shrugged. He sat up and put his cup and saucer on the table before sitting back.

“There has been a whisper many times over the years that Mr. Andrews had been having affairs with Lady Wilson over the years, even when their respective spouses were alive. He protested many times, but now Mr. Andrews simply ignores it when it’s brought up in his presence. I think he’s given up trying to protest his innocence. I would if that was me.”

“If you had a woman pestering you like that and spreading rumours, I would be certainly objecting if you did not.” Charlotte shot back.

Peter shot his wife an affectionate smile and winked at her. Emilia would normally smile at this sweet interaction. Charlotte had been unsure about Peter in the beginning, but it hadn’t taken long to fall hard and fast for the young man. Emilia could understand why; Peter Chambers was a kind, considerate person and could certainly turn women’s heads when he entered a room. Charlotte was a lucky woman, and Peter was incredibly patient to put up with Charlotte’s little eccentric ways. They were a perfect balance.

This had Emilia thinking about her father. He had always told her that she would be able to find someone like that for herself one day. He wasn’t concerned if Emilia was unmarried, as long as she was happy.

She missed him. Badly. Emilia could feel the tears starting back up again and she swallowed hard. She would not cry, not in front of them, again. This was something she needed to do elsewhere.

Focus on your anger. That works. Focus on that.

“He’s hiding something.” Emilia looked at her hands twisting around her handkerchief in her lap. “Even if he didn’t kill Father, he knows something. I’m sure of it.”

“Emilia?” Charlotte frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Emilia looked up, seeing her friend watching her warily.

“I’m talking about confronting him. Finding out what really happened. If he won’t come out and admit that he’s done wrong, I’m going to make him do it.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. She looked at her husband, who wore an equally bewildered expression. Charlotte turned back to Emilia.

“You’re thinking of going to Drake’s and confronting him? You’ll be thrown out if you do that. You won’t be able to get anywhere near him if you go and cause a fuss at his business.”

“I’ll figure something out.”

Emilia hadn’t been planning on doing that, not initially. But the more her anger built, the more she knew she couldn’t sit back and do nothing. She had to know what was going on, and if Thomas Andrews wasn’t going to give anyone any answers, she was going to get them. Her father was dead, and the finger was being pointed at the gambling hall owner. Emilia wasn’t about to let him sit back and think he had got away with something so awful.

Uncle Christian might be willing to drink his grief away, but Emilia wasn’t going to be passive. Someone had to do something.

Peter sat forward with a worried expression. “Emilia, I know you’re distraught over your father’s death, but you need to take a step back and calm down. If you do anything rash, it could damage your family’s reputation.”

Emilia scoffed. Her hands clenched into fists, her nails digging into her palms.

“If there are rumours going around regarding Father’s death, there’s a chance my family’s reputation is already being attacked. I can’t make it any worse for myself. And I’m not going to sit back and let my father’s reputation get smeared any further.”

If Mr. Thomas Andrews had committed a crime, then he needed to be exposed.



Thomas was worn out. He was always exhausted after going out riding. Anna liked hard riding. The child was mad, he was sure of it.

Though he did not begrudge his time with Anna. His daughter was a lovely person, far too grown up for a child of her age, she was too much for him. When she became old enough to find a husband, Thomas was sure Anna would make the young men jump through a series of challenges to prove that he could keep up with her and love

her enough to do it.

But time with Anna meant less time working. Thomas had bought Drake's on a whim, and he had found it to be the best investment he had made in years. It was a prosperous place, and Thomas could certainly have a day or two off, if he wanted, but he couldn't be gone from work all the time. But still Anna did not have a proper caregiver, and Thomas was finding himself away from Drake's far too often.

His staff had their own jobs in the house, and it wasn't to look after a twelve-year-old child. Thomas couldn't rely on his mother all the time; Lady Margaret Andrews had her own life to lead, and while she adored Anna, it wasn't her responsibility to look after her.

Thomas rubbed his sleepy eyes, leaning back heavily in his large, leather office chair.

The search for a governess was almost futile. So many women had come applying to be governess, and all of them had been qualified, perfect for the job, but they always left and disappeared without explanation. Thomas had been searching his mind for an answer, as he was never inappropriate with them. He wasn't even in the room alone with the women beyond their initial interview, and up until they suddenly left, all of the ladies were courteous towards him. Had he missed something? Was he supposed to have done something and they got offended? Thomas had no idea.

Anna needed a caregiver, but until that happened, Thomas was going to have to stretch himself thin trying to figure out how to teach a child their lessons and Manage Drake's. At least he had listened to his mother and taken on an estate manager to deal with everything else, otherwise Thomas would be severely struggling.

Who knew that it was this difficult to raise a child? Anna needed someone to guide her, a woman to show her things in the world. Thomas could teach her, but there was only so much he could do.

He was still trying to figure out the balance between his work and his home.

And he was still trying to figure out his estate manager's handwriting in the account books. He was too tired to focus properly, and the scrawl in front of him was just making it worse. Thomas scowled and

sat back again, rubbing at his eyes. Maybe if he went back to sleep for a little while? Seeing as he was the one in charge, they couldn't complain about that, could they?

A knock at the door made Thomas' head throb and he growled, glaring at the door. "What?"

The door opened and a familiar face appeared. Thomas blinked.

"Jenkins? What is it? I thought you were supervising something upstairs."

Thomas' valet came into the room. "I came to notify you of a visit you had while you were out this morning."

A visit at this hour? Thomas groaned.

"Not Lady Wilson again?"

"No, it wasn't her." Jenkins paused. "It was Constable Bowers."

That had Thomas sitting up. Constable Bowers was the local parish constable, and he was an overweight, jolly man who had an innate ability to make everyone feel at ease while maintaining authority at the same time. But as far as Thomas was aware, nothing had happened that would mean a visit from the constable.

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to talk to you about Jonathan Hill."

"Jonathan Hill?" Thomas frowned. "He's not complaining about something, is he? I thought we left on amicable terms and he was going to pay off his debts."

"It's not about debts." Jenkins was shuffling from foot to foot. "He's dead."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Thomas tried to grasp hold of what Jenkins had just said and it wasn't quite working. Jonathan Hill was dead? The man was the picture of health. Sharp mind as well. Thomas had a lot of respect for the man, especially when he paid off

his debts and agreed to things like a gentleman.

“How?” Thomas’ voice sounded hollow for his ears. “When?”

“Last night. Dead in an alley near Drake’s. Constable Bowers wouldn’t say how he died except that they were treating it as possibly suspicious.”

Possibly suspicious. That didn’t settle well in Thomas’ stomach. That could mean anything. Now Thomas was nervous. Nervous about what? He hadn’t killed him.

“And I presume Constable Bowers wants to speak to me about Mr. Hill.”

“Yes.”

Another thing to deal with. And one that was more worrisome than anything else. Someone had possibly killed a patron of his, or it could be that it was an accident and Constable Bowers wanted to make sure that no stone was left unturned. He was good like that.

So why did Thomas feel like he was about to be scrutinized? He slumped in his chair.

“When Constable Bowers comes back, send him in. I’ll talk to him.”

“Very good, Mr. Andrews.” Then Jenkins paused, tilting his head to the side. “I think that’s your mother arriving now.”

“I don’t hear...”

Then Thomas heard the distant rumble of a voice, just out of hearing.

His mother had arrived, and she was not happy. Thomas sighed.

“If you manage to catch hold of Lady Andrews, send her in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jenkins bowed and then left. Thomas rose to his feet and stretched his arms, preparing himself for whatever was wrong. Lady Margaret

Andrews was normally a mellow, sensible woman, especially in recent years since becoming a widow. But when she was upset, she could get very irate. That didn't happen much lately, so hearing it now meant something big had happened or Margaret's patience had been pushed too much.

A few moments later, a tall, willowy woman with dark grey hair wearing a lilac dress swept into the room. Thomas approached her but was surprised when Margaret Andrews jabbed a finger into his chest hard enough to make him stumble back.

"You know I love you to Heaven and back, Thomas Andrews, but I would appreciate it if you keep your tarts away from me."

"I beg your pardon?" Thomas started. "I don't have a..."

"Evelyn Wilson. Again."

Thomas groaned. Not again. He would be quite happy not to have to deal with that woman ever again. To bother him was one thing, but to approach his mother. Evelyn had to be mad. She knew that Margaret detested her, and Margaret's patience ran thin very quickly with her.

"What's she done now?"

"She came up to me while I was taking a walk." Margaret folded her arms, clearly unhappy. "She started talking to me about how disrespectful my granddaughter is, and how she needs a mother to bring her in or she's never going to make a good marriage."

"And what did you tell her?"

"I told her that if my son wanted a mother for his child, he would find one. Then I scolded her for even approaching me as she knows I would not support her suit." Margaret shook her head. "That woman just doesn't know when to stop."

"I figured that out years ago, Mother." Thomas leaned against the desk and ran his hands through his hair. "I can't believe how many times over the last decade I've told her to leave me alone and she just keeps coming back."

“Your grandmother’s words were taken to heart a little too much.”

Thomas growled. “Grandmother shouldn’t have said a word. If she was going to choose someone, she should have picked a woman who wasn’t so unstable.”

Margaret shrugged. “That’s your grandmother all over. I swear she was like Evelyn when she was a young woman.”

That wouldn’t have surprised Thomas. His paternal grandmother had gotten it into her head that she was a matchmaker because she managed to successfully introduce her sister to the man she married. All her other matches were disasters, but Letitia Andrews wouldn’t be swayed on it. Thomas knew that his mother and her mother-in-law had never gotten along because Margaret wasn’t who Letitia had picked out for her son.

Even five years after her death, Thomas still remembered her with shudders. The woman was overbearing, and she had done her best to derail his marriage to Olivia. Thankfully, his late wife had been tougher than he realized and had told her to suck on some lemons before walking away. That had been the most incredible thing Thomas had witnessed before the birth of his daughter.

“I don’t desire her at all.” Thomas shook his head. “The more she bothers me, the more I want to throttle her.”

“I’m sure there’s a line of people who want to do the same.” Margaret looked at the ceiling. She was looking less irate but still exasperated. “She doesn’t seem to be put off by the rumours about you with regards to your temper. It makes me wonder if she started the rumours to make sure no one got close to you.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she did. Or that she started the rumours about me having an affair with her while we were both still married.”

Thomas hated that rumour. He would never have betrayed his marriage, especially not for a woman like Evelyn Wilson, but some people he came into contact with were under the impression that he was a cad, who didn’t care about anyone else but himself. It hurt him to hear that and know people believed it, but every time Thomas tried to protest and point out that it was wrong it didn’t seem to help. It just made things worse.

He just wished it would stop. He wasn't a bad-tempered person - or an adulterer, and he wanted to set it right. It was such a shame when people preferred to listen to lies because they were more interesting than the truth.

Chapter Four

“*You* could call her out on it,” his mother suggested. “If you maybe humiliated her in front of lots of people, you know she doesn’t like being shown up in public.”

Thomas shook his head. “What would be the point in that? She doesn’t listen anyway; it would likely fuel the rumours that I do have a temper.” He ran his hands through his hair. “She makes me want to lose it most days.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t lost it with her. I know I have many times.”

“I don’t need to. Anna does that instead for me.”

Margaret’s mouth twitched in a slight smile. Even though she wouldn’t admit it, Lady Margaret Andrews was proud of her granddaughter for being able to speak out. Thomas had pointed out before that Anna was merely imitating her grandmother, which Margaret denied. But she was pleased about it in private.

“Maybe Anna should be a little nicer.” Margaret unfolded her arms and started to take off her gloves, putting them on the back of the chair by the fire. “I’m getting comments about how outspoken she is, and not just from Lady Wilson.”

“You’ve never been too bothered about it before, Mother.”

“It’s merely a suggestion, Thomas.” Margaret cast a sidelong glance at her son. “I don’t influence you in the slightest.”

“You used to.”

“Not anymore.”

This was true. In the last few years, his mother was certainly more respectful of Thomas' decisions, and how to deal with Anna. There were a few moments, but she always stepped back when told. Thomas wished his grandmother had done the same thing; the old lady had still been protesting his choices even on her deathbed.

"If Lady Wilson didn't want Anna to be unkind towards her, she shouldn't have said what she did about my wife."

"Point taken." Margaret sighed and patted her hair with a frown. "Did you hear about Jonathan Hill's death?"

"Literally two minutes before you arrived."

"I see." Margaret paused. "People have been approaching me throughout my walk. Evelyn Wilson wasn't the only one. They all asked me if you killed Mr. Hill."

"They what?"

Thomas thought he must have misheard. People were actually approaching his mother with that kind of question?

Margaret nodded.

"I had no idea what they were talking about, so they gleefully filled me in. Nobody seemed to be very apologetic about the fact they were openly asking me about something so awful."

Thomas was beginning to wish he had grown up into an obscure family where he didn't have to deal with the nobility. But when your father was the third son of a viscount, and whom had been knighted, that was easier said than done.

"What motive do I have for killing him, Mother? He was the one who had a motive to kill me, not the other way around."

"I never said I thought you had killed him."

"But did you even think it for a moment?"

Margaret rolled her eyes. "Thomas, I know you. You've lost your

patience with patrons who complain about paying you back, but I've never doubted you. You wouldn't kill someone, especially for something so ridiculous as not paying back the money they owe you. However," she went on, "there are some speculations going around already and I got to hear quite a few of them. One of the things I heard was that you two got into an argument and you roughed him up for not paying you back and it went too far."

That sounded even more ludicrous. Thomas wasn't sure whether to be shocked or angry. He snorted and paced away from his desk.

"I can't believe people would imagine that. Jonathan Hill and I were amicable enough. He was a little annoyed at having to pay me back what he owed, but he knew it was of his own doing."

"Did you see him last night?"

"Yes, for just a few minutes. We had come to an agreement about what we were going to do about his repayments. He left after shaking my hand and thanking me for being a gentleman about it."

This felt like a strange dream. It certainly wasn't what he needed right now. His reputation was meant to be stellar, and because of falsehoods, Thomas knew he was going to have to deal with even more rumours and speculations.

"What are you going to do now?" Margaret asked.

"I don't think there's anything I can do about it. You know what rumours are like and how quickly they spread." Thomas pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. "It doesn't matter how much you protest or tell them the truth; people are still going to believe what sounds more interesting."

Margaret sighed. "I don't understand why people don't mind their own business."

Thomas barked out a laugh. "I beg your pardon, Mother?"

"I'm not going to apologize for that, Thomas." Margaret certainly didn't look apologetic. "I do it so I can keep my ear to the ground on what people are saying about my son and granddaughter. I won't have anyone putting you down."

That was something. His mother knew the real man. She believed him. That mattered to Thomas. They hadn't seen eye to eye when he was a young man and living under her roof, but things had improved once he was given a nice cottage on his family estate as a wedding gift. Margaret even admitted that their relationship was better when they weren't under each other's feet. They rubbed off on each other in a bad way, and space certainly helped to put them back on equal footing.

One thing Thomas certainly knew about his mother, and this was even before they repaired their relationship, was that Margaret Andrews was like a lioness and very protective of her family. She refused to let anyone talk badly of them if they had done nothing wrong. But if someone close to her messed up, Margaret was the first one to let them have it. Thomas had to admire his mother for not being afraid to step up. She took the role of matriarch very seriously.

He heard the sound of the bell on the front door. Thomas sighed and checked that his waistcoat and jacket were done up properly.

"That's probably Constable Bowers right now. He wanted to speak to me."

"Do you want me to wait for you?"

"I'll be fine. But Anna would appreciate seeing you while I'm speaking to Bowers."

Margaret nodded and headed towards the door. Then she paused by Thomas and squeezed his arm.

"It's going to be all right, Thomas. I know it."

She left the room, and Thomas found himself wishing that he had his mother's faith in events. He certainly didn't right now.



"Emilia?"

Emilia rubbed her eyes and looked up. Charlotte was standing in the doorway to Father's study, watching Emilia with a wary expression.

Emilia knew she must look a sight, sitting behind her father's desk with his papers strewn everywhere. Jonathan Hill wasn't one for keeping a tidy desk, so searching through it wasn't easy.

But there had to be something here. It had been five days since Father died, and Emilia couldn't find anything regarding Thomas Andrews beyond a small collections book with debts marked off as paid. There had to be something. Didn't he have a secret drawer somewhere or a secret compartment in his study? Emilia hadn't been able to get into the study much as Uncle Christian had chosen to either stay in the study himself or lock it when he wasn't around. For some reason, while he was at the funeral the study hadn't been locked, going in while everyone was partaking of drinks and small talk in the drawing room seemed like a perfect opportunity. Emilia's aunts had already decided they were going to be the hostesses, in spite the fact Emilia's father hadn't spoken to them in years and despised them. Emilia didn't mind. She preferred to have very little contact with them, and vice versa.

Once she was inside, Emilia looked around. Christian had been adamant that nobody went in here, not even to clear up the mess he had made. It was like he was scared of being discovered.

Emilia wouldn't be surprised; Christian did have debts bigger than his brother's, and her father knew about it. He kept records. Had he been looking for something himself?

At least he was being kept busy by other busybody relatives now.

"Charlotte." Emilia shifted in her chair and smoothed down her skirts. "I thought you'd gone home."

"I was going to stay here tonight, remember? You wanted me to stay."

Did she? Then Emilia remembered. She hadn't wanted to be alone, and Charlotte had been more than happy to stay with her to help with the funeral. At least her closest friend kept Emilia's other relatives at bay, especially those who were constantly asking about what was going to happen with her father's estate. Emilia just told them a few choice words, which resulted in Charlotte stepping in and dealing with the demands and probing questions. Emilia was glad about that; she was sure she was going to snap.

Such stupid questions at a time when they should have been mourning a member of their family. Emilia would never understand why anyone would do that. Her father was dead, and they were more concerned about money.

“Oh, right.” Emilia rose to her feet. “I forgot.”

“I can tell.” Charlotte stepped into the study and shut the door. “What are you doing in here? I thought you said you had gone to get some air.”

“I’m looking...”

“What for?”

“Something. Anything.” Emilia gestured at the papers scattered about her father’s desk. A lot of them had ended up on the floor. “I need anything I can get on Thomas Andrews.”

Charlotte folded her arms and frowned. Emilia braced herself for another lecture from her friend. Charlotte had expressed that while Thomas Andrews might have been involved, both she and Peter thought Emilia shouldn’t become obsessed over finding answers. They would come in time, nothing happened at the snap of fingers. But Emilia didn’t want to wait. She needed to know now.

“I thought my husband gave you enough when we first heard about your father.”

“He gave me the version of Andrews that he knows. I need to know more, and from those closer to him.” Emilia swallowed back the hard lump in her throat. “I thought I could find something in Father’s notes. I knew he was in debt to him.”

“And you thought searching around in your father’s desk would help prove that Mr. Andrews is a dangerous man.” Charlotte sounded dubious. “What were you trying to find, may I ask?”

Emilia wasn’t entirely sure. A threatening message, perhaps? Something that indicated that Andrews was a bad man in a diary entry. She knew her father wrote in a diary, had done so since he was a boy, and Emilia had started doing the same when she was a girl. But she had already found his diary by his bed and had read through it. It

detailed that her father had the ability to owe money to Drake's every now and then, but he always managed to pay it back, even if it took a while and he lost more money in the meantime. Every time Andrews was mentioned, it was with a huge amount of respect. Her father liked him.

Emilia wondered how long it had taken to get the wool pulled over Jonathan Hill's eyes.

"You're still sure that he murdered your father, aren't you?"

"Of course, he did. Uncle Christian is certain of it."

"And your uncle word is reliable? You've not taken his word as gospel before, Emilia."

Uncle Christian was still grumbling about Andrews, and Emilia could see what he was saying made sense. So even when Peter Chambers pointed out that looking for someone to blame for something that might have been an accident was going to hurt her eventually, and Charlotte had protested about looking at all the possibilities, Emilia simply nodded and smiled at them, and then went right back to finding anything she could. She was not to be swayed.

"It happened, Charlotte. I know it." Emilia turned to her friend. "And I'm going to make sure Thomas Andrews pays for it. I've expressed my concerns to Constable Bowers."

Charlotte stared. "You're going after him with no proof and just the word of a drunk?"

"Uncle Christian isn't a drunk."

"He is, and you've complained of it multiple times. I've just left him drinking a whisky decanter all by himself."

Emilia gritted her teeth. She was torn between crying and getting angry. Why couldn't her friend be on her side?

Charlotte's expression was pained as she reached for Emilia's hands.

"I know you like to throw yourself into things, Emilia, but this is

going too far. You're going to start thinking about things that are not linked and believe that it's a conspiracy."

"Don't patronize me, Charlotte." Emilia pulled her hands away. "Something happened to my Father, and I want to know what. I know foul play was involved."

"But sometimes we may not get a proper explanation for something." Charlotte sighed. "You're going to have to take a step back and leave it be."

Take a step back? Emilia was shaking her head before Charlotte had finished.

"That's not an option now. Thomas Andrews did something, and I'm going to prove it."

"And when you don't find the evidence?"

"I'll find it."

Charlotte stared at her. Then she shook her head and turned away.

"Charlotte..."

But Charlotte was already walking away, shutting the door a little too hard behind her.



"Mr. Andrews?"

Thomas looked around. Jenkins had entered his study and was approaching him, stopping before him with a slight bow.

"What is it, Jenkins?"

"Constable Bowers is here again. He wants to speak to you about Jonathan Hill."

Thomas frowned. Bowers was back again? He had answered the man's questions a fortnight ago, and Bowers had promised that things would

settle down. From what Thomas had heard, the inquest had confirmed Jonathan Hill's death as an accident.

So why was he here now? Had he heard something that could conflict with the coroner's report? Thomas put his papers down.

"Show him into the morning room, Jenkins. Where's Anna?"

"Miss Anna is helping Farrow in the stables with the horses."

That was something. Anna didn't need to hear any of this.

"Make sure she stays out there until the constable's left."

"Of course."

Jenkins followed Thomas out of the study, heading towards the back of the house as Thomas locked up the room. His mother had wondered many times why Thomas locked his study door, but after a few attempts from patrons at Drake's trying to break in and find something to use against Thomas - something that wasn't there - she'd understood. Now it was a force of habit. Plus, it wasn't just his patrons trying to break into his study; some of them had attempted to pay off his servants to do the deed instead. They had been promptly dismissed and the patrons banned from Drake's with an order to pay up immediately or suffer social embarrassment.

It was startling what people did for money.

Thomas headed into the morning room, where he found Constable Bowers standing at the window, staring out into the front gardens. He had to admit the large, genial man looked very out of place in his home. It wasn't the grandest of places, but it was certainly above what the older man was used to. Thomas crossed the room and held out a hand.

"Constable Bowers."

Bowers turned, his expression stern as he shook Thomas' hand with a firm grip.

"Mr. Andrews. Forgive me for turning up without an appointment, but

this isn't a social call."

"I gathered that." Thomas gestured for him to sit, settling into a chair across from the constable. "What is it?"

"I..." Bowers eased himself into the chair with a heavy sigh. "I wanted to ask you some more questions about Jonathan Hill."

Thomas sighed.

"I thought I already told you what happened. He had left Drake's after discussing a payment plan with me, and that was the last time I saw him alive. We were in good spirits, and he even apologized for coming to me to make deals."

Thomas had even jested maybe he should cut Hill off from Drake's so he wouldn't keep going into debt, and that had been taken into serious consideration. It would mean losing a patron, but Thomas didn't want to see any of them go into bankruptcy.

"This is just something we need to go over again, Mr. Andrews. I need to know your whereabouts for when Mr. Hill died."

"You know where I was. I told you already. I was at Drake's when Mr. Hill died. We had just spoken about him repaying me what he owed, and then he left. That was it."

"When did you leave Drake's yourself?"

"About two hours later. In the opposite direction."

"And that's it." Bowers said slowly. "You didn't follow him afterwards?"

"Why would I do that?" Thomas pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. He could feel a headache starting. "Look, why are you asking me all of this again? You got my answers last time, he more than likely fell and hit his head."

Bowers was now staring at him. This was different to when they talked before. Thomas and the constable had already got on and Bowers had been almost apologetic for bothering him. Now it was like

a different person sat before him.

Bowers shifted in his chair.

“I have Mr. Hill’s daughter in my ear, demanding that I investigate you further. She seems to think that you have a role in her father’s death.”

Thomas stared. He must have heard wrong.

“She what? I didn’t kill him.”

“Miss Hill is very determined. She’s heard the rumours and been convinced, as have many others...”

Chapter Five

*T*he rumours. It had to be the rumours. Constable Bowers knew about them and he did his best to dispel them, but public opinion wasn't easy to get rid of when people had already made up their minds. From the way he was regarding Thomas now, Thomas did wonder if the constable was beginning to believe the rumours himself.

Thomas had chosen to avoid people as much as he could unless he was at Drake's. Any whispers about him having any involvement had those people getting a serious talking to. It probably didn't make things any better, but Thomas refused to let anyone talk badly about him or his family in his own business. That he wouldn't stand for.

Even so, knowing that even Hill's daughter had been taken in by this was still painful.

"Why would I kill Mr. Hill?"

"She said you beat her father up for not repaying his debts and it went too far."

"And you believe that?"

Bowers shook his head. But he looked hesitant about doing so.

"I know you're not a violent man, but she's adamant about it and I said I would follow up to pacify her."

Pacify. Thomas didn't believe that. The law seemed to be shifting out of favour with him. He would have to be careful with what he said in case it was twisted against him.

He rubbed his hands over his face. He had never met Hill's daughter,

but Hill had spoken a lot about her. The man loved his child dearly, even if she disapproved of the debts he kept racking up.

“This feels more like a warning me, than you are questioning me.”

“I suppose it is.” Bowers sighed. “I don’t know what will happen next, but I’m sure Miss Hill is going to make it her mission to come after you. I’m sure she’ll come around, but you need to watch yourself.”

Thomas groaned. He already had enough to deal with regarding the rumours prior to this mess and pushing Evelyn Wilson away from him without having a young woman determined to prove his guilt.

Rumours were far more poisonous than people realized. Thomas was finding out the hard way.



Emilia was glad when her relatives finally left the house the day after the funeral. Several of them had left as soon as the will was read out the previous evening, angry that they hadn’t gotten anything. Her family was very large, and they flocked around whenever someone died. Love didn’t come into it, unless it meant they had money with it. Jonathan Hill had a lot of money, even if it fluctuated due to his gambling - and bailing his brother out of his own debts.

But their family lawyer was adamant that everything was set in stone. Emilia inherited everything from her father and the remaining money was put aside as a dowry for her. The only person who had access to it other than Emilia was Uncle Christian. He was now her official guardian. He had to give his permission for Emilia to use the money and would keep an eye on the books.

Emilia wasn’t sure which of them was more surprised about that. She and her uncle didn’t really get along, and she didn’t think Christian was mature enough to be her guardian. He would certainly be rejoicing in the amount of money he got his hands on, and Emilia believed they would be bankrupt by the end of the year, if not sooner. She pleaded with the lawyer to not let Christian have as much access to her fortune, to which she was told she needed to have more faith in her uncle.

Emilia had no faith in him at all. She was sure they would have

nothing if Christian kept drinking and gambling as if he had no responsibilities. The man was so used to people bailing him out, especially his brother. Emilia was certain her uncle would love not being on a leash.

Her relatives weren't sympathetic to her plight, but it was not as if Emilia wanted any of this. She just wanted to have her father back. Money didn't replace him, and she felt cold and lonely.

Charlotte was still staying with her, but she was a little more distant. Emilia knew it was because of her decision to investigate Thomas Andrews. Charlotte was becoming more and more disapproving, but Emilia wasn't about to stop. Something was wrong here, she knew it. Her gut said there was more to her father's death, and she was going to find out what it was. No one was going to stop her until Emilia found out the truth.

Thomas Andrews had a lot to answer for.

Everyone retired for the night, Charlotte retiring early with very little words in Emilia's direction. That left Emilia with her uncle, who was slumped by the fire in the library, holding a very full glass as he stared into the fire. Emilia didn't want to stay watching the man drink himself into another stupor, so she headed up shortly after. But getting to sleep proved difficult. She tossed and turned for some time, but her mind was racing. None of her thoughts would stop long enough for Emilia to process them, and it was giving her a headache.

She needed a distraction. Maybe a book would help. Emilia slipped out of bed and put on her robe, tying a tight knot at her waist. Then she lit a candle and put it into a holder. The house was quiet as she padded downstairs. At two in the morning, the servants would be in bed by now. Nobody should be up to bother her as she headed towards the library.

Only she found she wasn't the only one awake at this time. Christian was still sitting by the fire, his glass now empty. It was like he hadn't moved. Emilia debated going back upstairs to her room; she didn't want to interact with her uncle. But then he looked up and saw her in the doorway.

"Emilia?" He struggled to his feet, swaying on his feet. "What are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep. I thought I would get a book."

"Oh. Don't let me stop you."

Christian sat back down heavily. Emilia knew she should grab a book, any book, and escape. But she found that she couldn't. Even with her opinion on her uncle, she couldn't walk away. Christian had lost his brother, and it had clearly hit him hard. Emilia put her candle holder on a table.

"How are you feeling?"

"I..." Christian was still looking into the fire with a glazed expression. He slumped further in his chair. "I'm just wondering what else could get worse. It feels really lonely without my brother. I lost someone who was always there for me."

Emilia let him talk. She wasn't about to cut in and argue that she had lost her father as well. They had had this argument many times over the last few days, with Christian getting so angry and irate the servants literally had to lead Emilia away in case her uncle took a swing at her. It was like his drinking was getting worse with the knowledge that his brother was dead, and Emilia was not about to back down because Christian wanted to have the last word. They had always knocked heads, but this was something else.

Emilia was in no mood to fight tonight.

"I suppose this means I've got to grow up now." Christian glanced at her. "I mean, I've got to look after you now."

Emilia managed a smile.

"You'll be fine. I'm old enough that I can take care of myself."

"I don't know about that. Women are fickle creatures."

Emilia's smile snapped off. She was not having this tonight.

"Don't start that again, Uncle. You've been talking for a long time that I'm a woman now and I don't need so much of a tight leash. You kept telling Father that ever since I turned eighteen."

“That was before I had responsibility.” Christian tilted his head to the side as he regarded her. “Now I’m beginning to see what Jonathan went through with you. He said you needed to be reined in and focus more on family than yourself.”

Emilia stared. Her father had never said that about her, she was sure of it. He respected her decision not to marry unless it was for love and was content to let Emilia grow up. He didn’t know the real reason why Emilia didn’t want any suitors, but he stood by her choice. Christian had never made any suggestions on it himself, so where was this coming from?

Emilia could feel her temper flaring. How dare he turn around and talk to her like this?

“First, *Uncle*, my father would never have said that, and second, if you start treating me like an object like everyone else in the family, you’re going to have a very rude awakening. You know I hate it.”

Christian grunted. “Stubborn as always.”

“Runs in the family, doesn’t it?”

Emilia took a deep breath. She could scream at him and say lots of things, but that wouldn’t get them anywhere and Christian would simply turn it around and make Emilia look like a hysterical woman. She would really lose it if her uncle tried that on her.

“Anyway, you won’t have to worry about me for a while.”

“What?” Christian blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going to stay at Charlotte’s home for a while.” Emilia swallowed and refused to look away as her uncle stared at her. “I can’t stay here. It feels empty without Father, and you and I aren’t exactly the best of friends. It’s best that I go and stay somewhere I can grieve properly without having to run into you.”

That was partly true; Emilia would feel better being able to grieve away from her uncle, but she needed to confirm it with Charlotte first. Her friend had no idea about this, so Emilia was going to need to do a lot of grovelling to get Charlotte to agree to this. Charlotte didn’t like Christian and had always told Emilia that her uncle needed to stop

being such a child with how he behaved, so it wouldn't be too difficult to get her to extend a last-minute invitation to come and stay with her and her husband. Emilia just needed to get to Charlotte before her uncle did.

"You want to mourn at her home?" Christian frowned. "You should be mourning here with your family."

"I will mourn however I please, and I don't want to do it when there's already a lot of tension between us."

"What if I say you're not going?"

Emilia snorted. "I'm not asking your permission, Uncle. It's already been planned. I'm leaving after breakfast."

"Not if I have anything to do with it." Christian rose unsteadily to his feet again. "And I say you're not going anywhere with Mrs. Chambers. As your guardian, you have to listen to me."

Emilia just smiled sweetly and turned away, selecting the first book she reached for before picking up her candle.

"You may be my guardian, but you are not Father. And he wouldn't tell me not to see my friends just because he didn't care for them." She opened the door. "I hope you get some sleep, Uncle Christian, and I hope you're not going to cause a scene tomorrow. You know it won't end well for you."

Then she left, resisting the urge to slam the door behind her.



"Are you sure that we should be doing this, Emilia?" Charlotte asked for the sixth time in an hour.

Emilia sighed and glared at her friend. She had been over this several times, and Charlotte just didn't seem convinced.

"Of course, I'm sure." She adjusted her gloves and looked around. "The best way to get contact with Mr. Andrews is to approach his mother. She's the only person who can talk to him, and he'll listen to

her.”

Everyone Emilia had spoken to had told her that. Thomas Andrews had become a very private man after his wife’s death, and that was nothing to do with his mourning. The rumours had made him retreat and he refused to entertain anyone unless they were a close friend. Lady Margaret Andrews, his mother, was apparently an influence on him. Andrews wouldn’t deny her anything, and she was so steadfastly loyal to her son.

She would be the best person to approach about getting close to Andrews. Emilia had put the plan into place in her head the night she had decided to leave her home and get away from Uncle Christian, and the older woman was key to this. Emilia didn’t know how else to approach Andrews without having someone introduce them.

Charlotte had been shocked at the plan when Emilia told her. She had readily agreed to let Emilia come with her at short notice after witnessing the tension between Emilia and Christian, but she still didn’t approve of what Emilia wanted to do. She had tried to talk Emilia out of it several times, but that wasn’t going to happen. In the end, she had given up and agreed to come along with Emilia while they sought out Lady Margaret on her daily walk. Charlotte was the one who knew Lady Margaret and they were on amicable terms, so it would be better if she was there for the introduction.

Now they just had to wait for her, and while the day was a nice one with the weather being warm and the park was very pretty to look at, Emilia was getting impatient. She wanted this to hurry along so she could start searching for more answers, but there was only so much she could do before she had to step back and let things take its course. And Emilia didn’t like it.

It had been nearly three weeks since her father’s death. And Andrews was still walking around. That shouldn’t be permitted any longer, and Constable Bowers was merely going through the motions. He wasn’t doing anything; Emilia knew that much. So, she had to do it herself.

“You are mad, you know that?”

Emilia turned to Charlotte, who was sitting on a bench while Emilia paced around on the path.

“What?”

“You’re meant to be in mourning and instead you’re lying in wait for Lady Margaret hoping to get close to her son so you can find something to show he killed your father.” Charlotte frowned. “Do you have any idea how ridiculous this sounds, and what you’re risking when you’re found out?”

“When I’m found out?” Emilia snorted. “I’m not going to be found out. I’m going to get the answers I need. If the man’s innocent, there’s no harm done, and I can slip back out of his life again.”

Charlotte stared at her. “Do you really hear yourself? You’ve already made up your mind. Even if you find nothing, you’ll be certain that he’s guilty anyway.” She looked away. “If you end up in a sanatorium after this, I will not be coming to visit you because all I will be saying is ‘I told you so’.”

Emilia glared at her friend. Charlotte was still against this, and she had been trying to talk Emilia out of this for the past three days. But Emilia was steadfast. She knew what she wanted to do, and it was going to happen. She was going to find out what was going on.

“I have to try something, Charlotte.” Emilia pressed a hand to her belly, her stomach churning. “Something is not right about this, and I want answers. The only way I’m going to get it is to get close to the man everyone says is responsible.”

“You have answers to your father’s death. You just don’t like them.” Charlotte looked away. “I can’t believe I agreed to do this.”

“You’re doing this because you love me.”

“Lately, I’ve been doubting that.” Charlotte looked up. Then she sat up and nodded towards the other side of the park. “That’s Lady Margaret now.”

Emilia turned. From where they were, they could see the huge vast of space that was the park outside the village Charlotte lived in. Lady Margaret lived not too far away, and she was known to take a walk every morning. She was a very healthy woman and very sociable; it was known that a forty-five-minute walk could turn into three hours if she got talking to people. Lady Margaret was also a staunch supporter

of her son, so while Emilia wasn't about to take her word as gospel regarding Andrews, she knew she would be the best choice in getting her son to listen.

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About the Author

Lisa Campell is an American author specialising in Steamy Regency romance tales. She decided to realise her lifelong dream of becoming a writer at a relatively mature age, after an inciting event taught her that it's better late than never. Transferring the intricate storylines of her boundless imagination to ink and paper has been her passion ever since.

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Lisa lives in Santa Clara, California, together with her dear husband. They are the parents of two children. Before devoting herself to Regency romance, Lisa split her time between being a mother and working as a travel clerk. She now finds her youthful spirit to be revitalised every time she brings one of her stories to life.



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